

## I'm getting used to the thought by pinkpurpleblue

**Series:** [Except late at night \(maybe I'm not\) \[1\]](#)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, BAMF Maxine "Max" Mayfield, BAMF Steve Harrington, Billy Hargrove Being an Asshole, Gen, Good Babysitter Steve Harrington, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Not Canon Compliant, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Protective Steve Harrington, Romanticization of cigarette smoking, Slow To Update, Steve Harrington Has Powers, Steve Harrington-centric, There's a few Steve is from the lab fics on here, re-did the summary so we'll see if it sticks i guess, recently re-edited!, set in the finale of season 2, slight whump, so here's my contribution to that

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington

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**Summary:**

When Steve sees Eleven again, he wants to cry.

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Steve Harrington was raised in Hawkins Lab, and he's spent the past six years trying his best to forget. It doesn't matter that he can stop time with his mind or that most nights he wakes up screaming. He's Steve, not Seven. He's moved on.

Or at least he thought he had, until the little sister he thought was dead shows up.



# 1. Chapter 1

## Author's Note:

This was inspired by anonymouseling who wrote [insert James Bond reference here] bc like I'm trash for Steve has powers AUs and that one is real good so like...

When Steve sees Eleven again, he wants to cry.

*I held you as a baby.* He wants to say.

*I'm so glad you're alive,* sticks in the back of his throat.

His mouth goes dry as he holds back, *I left you there. With him.*

So many years have passed - but that one regret sticks in the back of his head no matter what he does.

He can't believe that his little sister is right there. He also can't believe that his little sister looks like a greaser, but he saves that revelation for another time. But it's Eleven, little Eleven, and she doesn't look much younger than he was when he escaped. Hell, he must have only been a couple of years older than she is now. Nancy had briefly told him about her when they were still together, but she didn't know much other than that she lived in their basement and had superpowers. Steve felt like he'd been punched in the gut when he learned she was living *in the house* of the girl he dated.

He hasn't seen any of his siblings in years, and it was always easier and less painful to assume they all died and hopefully took Brenner down with them. He knew that wasn't true, no matter how much he tried to avoid the Hawkins Power and Light facility, Hawkins is a small town. Every time he drives past it, his hands tighten on the steering wheel so hard he's scared one day he'll break his hand.

Looking at the kid he hasn't seen in what feels like another lifetime, he has to the urge to Stop just so he can catch his breath. Her hair is curly and grown out, reaffirming that she's not back there anymore. If she's anything like him, he guesses she'll never get her hair cut again.

He's fights it back his breath coming out a bit quicker, mostly because now he's thinking of his last day in the Lab; of the white walls towering over him, of the adrenaline that was running through his whole body.

Seven wasn't cooperative that day. *Stubborn*, they had called him. *Insolent*. Those were words he knew well; he couldn't go a week without being called some variation. He wasn't as much of a fighter as the others, especially Eight- but he was old enough to know that everything about the lab and the men was bad. He saw a lot more than most of the others did. They could all do special, important things; Eight could make anyone see anything she wanted, Nine could see things that were going to happen before they happened, and Seven could Stop time. As long as he cleaned up the blood from his nose and went back to the exact same spot he was before he Stopped, then they never knew that he had even used his power.

But Seven had been practicing something else, he had learned that he could stop time in specific areas, he could create his own pocket of time that stood still while the rest of the world moved. It was difficult to do, especially the smaller the area was. And he had hidden it, from

Brenner and the scientists. But he got caught.

He had made Brenner angry when he was found out. And making *him* angry had made the guards come after Seven. And that's how it started when they moved forward, and Seven didn't realize he was backing away until he hit the wall, and there were five men, the bad men, that crowded around him and there was nowhere to run. The men grabbed at him, their fists bunched into his clothes, hands grabbing onto his arms and his shoulders. They pulled him, dragged him across the room, toward his room, toward another day where he would be stuck in the Lab, where he would continue being an experiment until he died. The thought kept swirling in his head, and it terrified him more than the idea of leaving. The not knowing what was behind the barbed wire fence that surrounded the Lab.

That spurred him into motion and Seven kicked at the men, screaming until his throat and lungs burned. He tried to Stop, to freeze everything in place, but it just kept flickering, Stopping and Starting again, he couldn't hold it in place for more than a few seconds at a time. He needed to calm down, needed to breathe, but their grips were too tight, nails were digging into his skin, and Seven's heart was steadily working its way out of his ribcage and into his throat.

If he could calm down and concentrate, he could get some leverage. Before, when he was practicing Stopping in smaller areas, a guard had come in and grabbed him, telling him that Seven was needed, but he didn't want to go. *Stubborn.*

Later, when the guard had been found dead, they called it *natural causes*. Seven didn't know what that meant, but he knew it wasn't true.

Seven had been angry and so *scared*. The guard had been angry and Seven's blood stained his knuckles. Seven had been practicing, he had Stopped one of the scientist's watches, without them noticing, and they complained about how slow it was the whole day. He had done other things like that too, but nothing like he did then, at that moment Seven had focused on the way his face stung, and the man standing over him.

"Weirdest fucking thing." A guard had told one of the others a couple of days after. "Simultaneous organ failure. Bastard's body just shut down. He was a healthy SOB, too."

The man with the hands clenched around his arms, and an elbow hooked around his neck, dragging him, choking him, Seven feels that same mixture of anger and fear settle in his body as he did that night. He chokes in a breath and squeezes his eyes shut, calling back to that night, that same exact feeling.

It's not so different from Stopping time altogether, it's just more complicated, takes more out of him. But he reached out toward time itself and pulls. Not the way he usually does, with a firm grasp around it, this time it's like wading his hand in water and trying to stop one part of the stream without interrupting the other.

The man whose arm is cutting off Seven's air goes limp, and his body hit the floor with a thump. On the outside, it looked like organ failure, but much later, Seven will figure that it's his organs going out of sync with the rest of his body, Stopped. The other men followed soon enough, and Seven found himself unrestrained. He wiped the dripping blood from his nose and ran. The alarms started blaring, and doors shut with lockdown going into effect. Seven kept trying to Stop

everything so he can just run, so he can get out of the lab and all the bad men in it. But it keeps flickering, killing those men had taken so much energy - so instead, he just kept going to save his energy.

He's small, and he's always hated it before, but it helps him be slippery; to dodge and duck past men and their bullets. By the time he was close to an exit, the men were far behind him. It was only a matter of time though, since he could hear the stomping of their boots coming closer, his heart hammering in time to the sound.

Seven frantically felt around the edges of the large exit door, looking for any kind of release switch to turn off the lockdown mechanism. Six had told him about release switches once, but he hadn't been talking about any doors that lead to outside of the lab. Seven wished he had listened closer to Six when they were talking, maybe then he could have helped with their ill-fated escape attempt. Seven and Nine had figured that Six must have been planning it for weeks, maybe even months. Seven had been planning for the last ten minutes. And the more he checked of the door and the area around it, the louder the stomping got, and the closer the men came, and the more Seven was sure he was going to follow too closely in Six's footsteps.

He had still found no evidence of any switch or latch around the door when the men caught up to him, and there were double the normal amount that was usually sent after runners; though he had only personally seen two escape attempts in his life, Five and Six. Both had been shot.

Seven scanned the line of the men coming toward him and he prepared to have to fight his way through, with barely any energy and no chance of actually making it out alive, but then he saw Eight. He couldn't help the relief flooding through him at the sight of her.

If there was ever a fighter, it had to be Eight. He would've thought out of any of them, the first one to escape would've been her. Too bad Six had beat her to the punch, but maybe that was better for her; considering Six had gotten shot the minute he got to the fence. Either way, Eight saw it as her mission to piss off any person in authority in any way she could. Which was why it wasn't overly surprising to see with her, a guard holding her firmly next to him as he marched forward.

Seven closed his eyes and concentrated on Stopping. He figured there wasn't gonna be a better time, and he needed to find another way out. It flickered for a moment before holding in place, time freezing the men and everything else around them. He walked toward Eight and pulled her into timelessness with him. It wasn't hard to pull different people and objects into the timeless, but he was very selective with what he did pull in. It was another part of his power he had hidden from them, but it was a much easier thing to hide. Seven had pulled in Eight before, so she wasn't surprised when everything around her was frozen.

"You're leaving?" Eight said, stumbling a bit due to suddenly gaining her momentum back.

"Yeah." Seven answered, prying the man's fingers away from her arm so she could move around. The action would most likely at least sprain the man's fingers, given how roughly Seven had to pull; when time returned, the added momentum wouldn't be fun.

"Thanks," Eight rubbed her arm, her tone was hesitant.



“What?” Seven asked, not knowing Eight to be the kind of person to hold back on saying something. The opposite, in fact.

“I’ll help you.” She started, “Make it look like you already got out somehow. Go, hide in one of the search trucks; they’ll get you past the fence.”

“What, no! Eight, come with me.” He begged, not knowing what to do or where to go if he gets out. Having Eight with him would make things so much easier, and he wouldn’t be so alone.

“You need to go, Seven.” She says impatiently, “You can’t hold this for much longer, and you can’t keep pulling me in, you’ll exhaust yourself. I’ll get out someday, but right now, you have the chance to. Take it.”

He nods, the blood was fully running from his nose, and he knew he couldn’t hold it for much longer. "Take care of Eleven."

She just nods, and Steve lets her gently slip back into time, frozen.

Seven looks back at Eight one last time before taking off into a sprint toward the garage. The garage was an off-limits area, but Seven knew where it was. He used to Stop and sit in the front seat of the trucks pretending to drive, turning his hands on the steering wheel and playing with the buttons, they didn’t do anything of course, because everything was Stopped, but he found it fun anyway.

The trucks were lined up meticulously, and there were men frozen in time, littered around the area. Seven ran toward a truck at the end of the line, pushing the back open, he climbed in, closing the door behind him. He wiped the blood that was still dripping from his nose, and crawled under a seat, curling into the smallest ball he possibly could. He let out a breath as he let time fall back into place; and waited for what felt like hours before the truck finally started up. It peeled out of the garage, taking a sharp turn before slowing down on the residential streets of Hawkins. Seven was sure that at any moment, they would find him crushed underneath the seat and he would be taken back, but that moment never came.

Instead, the truck finally stopped at the edge of the town, all the men hopping out, radioing to the others that they were going to search the roads and trails. Seven figured there wouldn't be a better time to leave, so he Stopped - already feeling faint from using it again so soon. He slipped out from his hiding spot and got out of the truck. There was a large sign that read "Now leaving Hawkins."

Seven was tempted to go that direction, but it was a long stretch of road, and he would be walking. He didn't trust that he could Stop for long enough to get out of sight. So, he decided to duck into the large forest that surrounded the area. He would wait for their search to give up, and then he would find some way to leave Hawkins, to get as far away from the Lab as he could.

Walking among the trees, Seven smiled. He was free.

## 2. Chapter 2

### Summary for the Chapter:

Steve likes living, and he really doesn't want to have to explain to Hopper or any of the kids' parents that their babysitter got them killed.

They all end up splitting up; El and Hopper go to close the gate, Steve stays behind with the kids, and the rest go to de-mindflyer Will. Steve hates the thought of Eleven going anywhere even close to the lab, He can barely drive past the place himself, but it's not surprising that El is braver than him; so he stays quiet. Either way, babysitting seems simple enough. All he has to do is keep Eleven's shithead pack of friends alive while the others do their thing. Once they close the gate, Will gets saved (again.) and they can all go back to their perfectly normal lives; plus, Steve now gets the satisfaction of knowing that someone else from the lab is actually alive. Last year he had to fend off the demogorgon at the Byer's house that he didn't know was there, with a baseball bat that wasn't his. He's hit his fair share of demo-dogs this time around, so he figures that being benched isn't the worst position he could be in for this fight.

Which means of course the kids have to hatch the dumbest plan he's ever heard.

"Hey! Hey! Hey! This is not happening!" He says firmly, hoping that it puts an end to their stupid idea of going into the tunnels and basically *asking* the demo-dogs to come attack them.

All his dreams of just sitting back and waiting and just keeping the kids alive might be harder than he thought, considering they're some of the most self-destructive kids he's ever met. He can't say that he's not tempted. He knows Eleven can close the gate; she'd been

throwing people into walls since she was two. He's pretty sure Nine had a few scars on his back from her old tantrums. So, it's not that he's worried about her *ability* to close the gate. He's worried that she'll exhaust herself before she even cuts through all of the demodogs crawling around the lab. It's not exactly easy to use your powers for long periods of time; he knows that way too well. And if she has to fight her way through the massive pack patrolling the lab and then *still* close the gate...

She's strong, but she's still a kid.

Even then, there's still no guarantee that if he goes along with the kids' plan, they'll make it out alive. Steve likes living, and he really doesn't want to have to explain to Hopper or any of the kids' parents that their babysitter got them killed.

So he lets out a long breath and tunes out the kids' grumbling.

He could just go to the tunnels himself. he would have to Stop time and get down to the tunnels, but that would be easy enough. After that, he'd just light the place up and come back to the house. That way, he could help the kids and El at the same time.

He glances at the door, fiddling with the keys in his pocket before giving up on the idea. He doubts he could hold time for long enough, and if he ends up passing out, the kids will be alone. He's barely used his powers in the last few years, asking himself to Stop everything for that long is dangerous and stupid. For once he decides on the safer option, which is sticking to the plan; Babysitting.

Besides, he trusts Hopper, he bets that the chief would take the hit before he let anything happen to Eleven.

He walks back toward the kids, confident in his decision when he notices them all peeking out the window.

“It’s my brother.” He hears Max say. His head immediately starts hurting at the mention of Billy Hargrove; grade A asshole and a walking-talking reminder of what Steve used to be.

Billy is the epitome of what Steve grew up thinking was normal. Seven still fresh out of the lab had fallen in with Tommy and the popular, peer-pressure crowd before he even knew what algebra was. He was already years behind in terms of grades and regular schooling since the lab didn’t exactly teach him how to write an essay. It had given him a cool “doesn’t-care-about-homework” look. And since he didn’t have much of a vocabulary, he learned most of it from Tommy; who didn’t have much of a vocabulary himself other than insults. Steve had the opportunity to become anything he wanted; he was free of electro-shock and needle pricks, and yet he had decided on asshole as his main personality trait. It’s still something he regrets.

At least he’s better now.

Even if it means standing in between Hargrove and the kids. Trying to convince him that the kids weren’t even at the Byer’s house didn’t work, since they decided that looking through the blinds right where Billy could see them was a good idea. Steve picks himself up off the ground and heads after him, where he’s heading toward the kids; the exact opposite of what Steve wanted.

He walks in on Billy slamming Lucas into a cabinet, and Steve sees red.

He lands a few punches, and tries to ignore how good it feels. His goal is to move Billy away from where the kids are standing, then they'll be out of the way. Stopping time at this point is probably considered cheating, but if he can get in an angle where the kids won't notice, he's not gonna turn down the opportunity.

Billy takes hits surprisingly well; even moving his head to absorb the shock. It makes Steve feel bad for a minute, realizing that Billy must get beat on often enough for him to know how to properly take a punch, but he shakes it off; he can't afford to lose focus when he's in the middle of a fight. Soon enough he manages to back Billy into the corner of the kitchen.

Except that's when Billy grabs a plate off the counter and slams it over Steve's head.

He stumbles and tries to orient himself, he can already feel the blood beginning to pool in his hair, and it's familiar, it's *grounding*, in a way.

He doesn't know why he wasn't expecting Billy to use the shit around them as weapons, but he's always sorted fights like this into the *roughhousing* category of things. He doesn't really make a habit of getting into fights, despite his track record, but none of the boys in school had ever hit him as hard as the guards from the lab, were never so close to deadly; so he doesn't hit back as hard. Fitting in was all about imitation, and so that's what he did.

But if Billy wants to fight, Steve can *fight*.

Billy grabs onto his arms and moves to headbutt him, but Steve stops for just a literal second, barely even a flicker of time; just enough to shift his head slightly out of the way; it's an old trick he hasn't used in forever. It used to be an easy way to maneuver without the lab realizing he was even using his power. He obviously can't position himself around as much as he wants to, considering the kids are looking straight at them; so he figures the smaller movement isn't too much.

Billy's headbutt only just catches the side of his head; it still stings like a bitch, but it doesn't down him as much as it would have if he hadn't stopped. He takes a second to catch his balance. Billy goes in for another punch, but Steve sidesteps it, grabs at his shirt collar, and slams his knee as into Billy's stomach. He quickly follows it by cupping his fists and slamming them down on his back while he's doubled over. That used to be the guards' favorite move, except they would usually use the butt of a gun instead of fists; Steve figures it should still have the same impact. He shakes off the strange satisfaction it gives him that the lab might manage to win him a fight years after he's escaped.

He takes a moment while Billy's recovering to catch his breath; he can already feel a black eye forming and his knuckles are getting sore.

Eight had called him a coward once. A guard had decked him; sending Seven straight toward the ground. He stayed silent, struggling to his feet, not daring to look the man in the eyes. Eight had gotten the same treatment, but instead of cowering she had spit at him and then held his gaze. They both had gone in an off-limits area; both had been found with blood dripping from their noses. The

only difference was that Seven had taken his punishment, Eight had not.

Billy was lucky he wasn't going up against her.

Steve could end this fight right now, Stop everything and just cold clock him while everything stood still, but that would be a big movement and the kids would definitely catch it. So instead he waits. As expected Billy arcs his shoulder for a punch and Steve sidesteps it, hooking his arm around Billy's and slams his foot into the back of his knee. He struggles for a moment to grab his other arm while Billy thrashes against the flimsy hold. They end up with Steve standing behind Billy, his arms holding his arms behind him. It's not a strong hold by any means, and it won't hold for long. Steve looks around desperately. He spots a needle sitting on the counter behind where the kids are standing.

"Dustin!" He yells over Billy's grunting and promises to kill Steve. "The needle!" He gestures as best he can with a lunatic fighting against him.

"What?" Dustin says, his face scrunching in confusion and Steve wants to strangle the kid. Billy slips an arm out of his grasp and Steve has to Stop so that he can get ahold of him again. He hopes that the kids didn't notice reality weirdly stuttering in all the confusion.

Max thankfully grabs the needle and marches toward them, uncapping it.

"Don't you fucking dare, M-" Billy gets out before Max stabs him in



the neck with it. His struggling immediately slows and Steve stumbles a bit under suddenly having to carry the entirety of Billy's weight. He lowers him to the floor and nudges him with his foot to make sure he's out.

"Thanks." He tells Max, who takes her turn nudging Billy with her foot. The adrenaline starts to fade away and he wipes the blood steadily dripping from his nose on his jacket sleeve. That fight had been the most he's used his powers in a while. He wonders if that's what's causing the sudden lightheadedness, though to be fair, the plate that was smashed against his head is also a worthy contender.

"No problem." She says, still staring at the unconscious form of her brother gracefully knocked out on the Byer's living room floor.

"Holy shit, dude!" Dustin says, nearly slamming into Steve from running over; His face lighting up like Steve hung the moon and stars. The rest of the kids also look fairly stunned; Steve hopes it not because they noticed the whole stopping time thing.

"Where'd you learn to fight like that?" Lucas says, also rushing over to join the 'nudge Billy with your foot' club Steve accidentally started.

"I did not think you were gonna win that," Mike says at the same time.

*Me either, he thinks.*

“Get in the car,” He says.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

haha writing is so fun  
hahahathiswaseditedlikefivetimes

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Summary for the Chapter:

He parks by the pumpkin patch, figuring that the tunnels are probably signified by the giant sinkhole that's in the middle of the field.

Steve drops himself into the driver's seat of his car and turns the engine. He looks over and sees Dustin already sitting shotgun, digging around in the glovebox. Luckily, all that's in it is some gum, a half-empty water bottle, some random homework he never got around to turning in. Glancing in the rearview mirror, Steve sees the rest of the kids hunched together in the backseat. Max sits in the middle of Mike and Lucas, who are arguing about the fight. They keep leaning across Max to make their point so he's expecting her to punch one of them any minute; his bet is on Mike. There's also no middle seat belt in the backseat but he figures she'll be okay if her skull is as thick as her brothers.

"You guys grab everything we need?" Steve asks, turning back to Dustin, the kids had rushed to grab all the gasoline in a two-mile radius, while Steve had dragged Billy's heavy douchebag ass out to his car. Hopefully, once he wakes up and realizes he got his ass beat by Steve (who only cheated a *little* ); he'd just drive home and they could all deal with him sometime else. Preferably when they *weren't* trying to close an interdimensional gateway to an alternate plane of existence or whatever the gate actually is.

"We're ready." Dustin confirms, "Why don't you have your registration in your glovebox?" He continues, opening the pack of gum that was in there.

"How do you know what a registration is?" Steve asks, snatching the

pack of gum away from him instead of answering. He doesn't know how to say that his car is technically stolen, so instead, he just turns up the radio over Dustin's explanation and puts the car in reverse.

"Buckle up." He says toward the backseat, peeling out of the driveway. There's a yelp from the back, which he figures is Max getting thrown against Lucas.

"Where am I going?" He asks, moving up the road.

"There's an entrance on Merrill's farm," Mike says, leaning forward to mess with the radio dial. Steve pushes him back to his seat, ignoring his grumbling about Steve's apparently shitty music taste.

"Of course there is," Steve mutters under his breath, switching lanes. The farm really isn't that far, it sits just near the edge of Hawkins, a little bit away from the 'Now Leaving Hawkins' sign. Though, he only knows this because Merrill's farm is where he had hid during his first few weeks out of the lab, between this and until Eleven's appearance, this day seems to be dredging up a lot of Steve's past.

"It's up on-" Dustin starts, his arm in front of Steve's face, pointing in the direction of the farm.

"Yeah, I know where it is." Steve says, knocking Dustin's hand back down. If he knew babysitting involved this much manhandling, he probably wouldn't have volunteered.

Dustin looks up at him weirdly, which is fair, since nobody ever really goes up to the farm area. There's nothing else up there and you have to go through a few dirt roads to even get up to the farm itself. It's what made it a perfect hiding spot for little Seven while the white trucks had been patrolling Hawkins. So really, "King" Steve shouldn't be up near the farm for any reason. And "Dumbass Steve with a big secret" should really learn to keep his mouth shut.

"Don't look at me like that, I volunteer there sometimes." He covers, and it's not a complete lie, he does go and help out Merrill every once in a while; except the kids don't need to know it's because the man had found him sleeping out in his field eating his corn six years ago.

"You volunteer...at a farm?" Mike asks, leaning back up toward the front.

Steve sighs and steps on the gas a little more, throwing Mike back into his seat.

"Yeah, you little shit, I gotta have *something* on my college applications." He says, turning a little too hard up onto the dirt road that leads up to the farm. He hears another yelp from Max, and presses on the brakes a little.

"*Farming*?" He hears Mike whisper to Lucas.

They go up the road for a minute, his tires not happy to be taken up an uneven uphill dirt road. He parks by the pumpkin patch, figuring that the tunnels are probably signified by the giant sinkhole that's in

the middle of the field.

They get to work getting all the supplies they need, including putting on masks and goggles to keep out the spores that apparently flood the tunnels. He helps the kids suit up with packs of gasoline and sprayers. Mike's bandanna mask keeps slipping down to his neck, so Steve heads toward him.

"Wheeler!" Steve says.

"What?" He responds impatiently. Steve ignores him and turns him around, then he undoes the shitty knot and ties it tighter so that it'll actually work and the kid doesn't breathe in whatever shit lives down there.

"Now we're ready," Steve says, throwing down the rope that leads into the crater.

Climbing down into the tunnels, Steve really doesn't envy Will in the slightest. If this is even a preview to what the Upside Down looks like, he's glad he wasn't the one stuck in it.

It's dark, with the spores clouding every inch of the damp walls, he swears the sounds of his breathing and footsteps seem ten times louder than usual.

He shifts his backpack on his shoulder and helps the kids climb down. He pats his pocket to make sure his lighter is still there. He's

not overly attached to it, he stole it from a gas station years ago. It was mostly used to light cigarettes and occasionally burn classified government documents. It'll do.

Steve manages to get Mike to stay behind him when the kid declares himself navigator, trying to run in front and get himself killed. Other than that, the journey through the tunnels goes well enough; the makeshift masks keeping out spores and whatever else may be in the air. It isn't long before they make it to the hub.

It isn't as intimidating as Steve thought it would be. It's not huge; the walls of the tunnels only slightly hollowed out to make room for the center.

The kids fan out, soaking the walls and floor in gasoline. Once the hub is decently covered, they huddle together with a safe distance from the flammable area.

"Here goes nothing." He mutters, flicking his lighter open, he lights it and reels his arm back. It feels like the whole room is holding its breath. He throws the lighter and the hub goes up in flames.

It only feels like a minute later that the demo-dogs start coming. They run back toward the entrance. Adrenaline shoots into his veins and every cell of his body is alert and alive as he swings, making sure that the kids can run freely. His heart beats so loudly he's sure it's ready to jump out of his chest. It's a familiar feeling, but he hasn't felt it since the Demogorgon, and before that; his escape from the lab. He can't say he likes how much these little monster hunting excursions keep reminding him of the past. He buried it for a reason, and now it won't stay buried no matter how hard he tries.

Still, he guesses, there are worse ways to spend a Thursday; saving his little sister who he hasn't seen in years and subsequently, the entire town of Hawkins seems good enough.

Their path eventually clears and they run for it. He lets of a breath of relief at the sight of the rope and the light that shines from the entrance. Steve runs in front and he grabs Max and lifts her up so she can scramble up the rope to the surface. The sound of Demo-Dogs running echoes through the tunnels, and he knows they don't have long before they catch up.

"Go, go, go!" He shouts. His hands hook around Lucas' waist and he practically throws him up toward the crater that leads out this literal hell-hole.

"Steve!" Dustin shouts, Steve turns to look and sees a swarm of dogs heading toward them.

"Shit!" Steve says, grabbing at Mike and lifting him up toward Lucas' outstretched hand. Lucas and Max pull him up, the dogs getting closer by the second. Three kids down; one to go. If he has to stop time to get the kids out of the tunnels alive and uninjured then he will; consequences be damned.

He looks for Dustin and sees that the dogs are almost on top of them. They'll be overwhelmed in a few seconds, they're out of time to try and climb, so instead, he says a quick prayer and yanks Dustin behind him. He closes his eyes and Stops for at least the third time that day.



He opens his eyes and time stands still, but instantly he can tell something is off. The space around him feels heavy and thick, and holding time in place seems to take more effort than usual. He knows he's not burned out because if he was time would just flicker; he wouldn't be able to hold it for more than a few seconds at a time, but what's happening now just feels wrong.

He tries to move toward Dustin, to get him up and out of the tunnels but and he can't move at all. It's like he Stopped but he's not pulled in. He tries to focus and just Stop the area they're in, but that just takes more effort and he realizes that he can't fucking *breathe* . He can't stay Stopped forever, especially if he has to hold his breath. He has no choice.

He lets go, and time falls back into itself. The demo-dogs rush toward them and he covers Dustin as best as he can. He shuts his eyes and feels blood dripping from his nose.

The dogs knock into him full force and he can hear the kids screaming. He tightens his grip on Dustin and waits for the end to come but instead, the dogs just...push past them, running deeper into the tunnels the opposite direction of where they came from.

"El." He hears Mike say above him; the dogs must be going after her, which means she's closing the gate. Steve just hopes they bought her enough time.

He can't get his hands to stop shaking, but he gives Dustin a boost up the rope anyway before climbing up it himself. Compared to the tunnels; the night sky seems bright as shit as soon as he takes his

goggles off. He rips the bandana off his face and uses it to wipe the drying blood from his nose.

“Holy shit.” Max says, breaking the stunned silence that falls over the group, all of them taking a moment to recover from what just happened.

They all pretend not to see Mike or Lucas wiping away some tears or Dustin puking in the grass just a few feet away and he’s probably gonna have to throw a bunch of money at their parents to get them all therapy, but they’re alive. He’s counting that as a win.

They start packing up all the shit they brought with them, most of it just gets thrown in his trunk, which is fine since he’d rather not have to explain to Merrill next time he visits that he let a bunch of kids wreck his farm.

He shuts the trunk harshly, stumbling after it’s closed. His vision starts swimming and he feels warm like he’s in a sauna. He leans against his car and takes a few deep breaths; they calm him down somewhat, but he’s still swaying on his feet.

“Steve?” Max asks, waving her hand in front of his face.

“M fine, just the adrenaline wearing off.” He responds, stumbling around to the driver's side. He feels like he’s burning from the inside out; there’s a good chance he got a concussion from fighting Billy, but he’s pretty sure this isn’t what a concussion feels like. His head is pounding and he can feel someone shaking him. Probably Dustin. He tries to look over but he can’t concentrate, his vision and hearing

going in and out.

He stumbles again, and everything goes black.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So full disclosure this story started as Whumptober prompt and I didn't mean to expand it, which means that I started it at a really weird place in season 2, which means we've now reached the part where I'm going off script (more than I already have)

And I also don't plan out anything too much so really I'm just as much along for this ride as anyone else so yeet I guess

## 4. Chapter 4

### Summary for the Chapter:

He doesn't remember getting his number drawn on, but it must have hurt, he looked at little Eleven's face, stuck in a scream.

Seven was glad when they pulled him from the silence of his room, the tall walls made the whole room feel smaller, and he had tucked himself into the corner to try and give himself some space. They would sometimes come in; take him from his room to a bigger one with machines and bright, white walls. Today was one of those days.

It was so cold and the guards' grip would leave bruises on his upper arms but it wasn't still or silent like his room and Seven was grateful for that. He obediently went and sat on the exam table, swinging his legs to the hum of the different machines in the room. He had been sitting for a few minutes when a white coat walked through the door. A doctor, Seven figured. Three had taught him how to tell the difference between the white coats once, the doctors and the scientists. He didn't really know why it was important to know but Three had told him to learn it anyway, so he did.

The man was old, with wrinkles that littered his face and a few spots of hair that clung to his scalp. He put on gloves and grabbed various tools from a cabinet across the room. Seven wanted to ask what the tools were and what they did, but he forced his mouth shut instead. He'd been learning to keep his mouth shut, and he was getting better at it.

The doctor seemed to be a quiet man anyway, speaking only in grunts and hums, like his machines. He moved Seven when he needed him to move and did the grunting sound if Seven squirmed.

He forced his mouth open and swabbed the back of his throat. Seven gagged and forced himself not to cough. The doctor hummed and turned back toward his cabinet while Seven swallowed the bad taste in his mouth. With another grunt at Seven's squirming, he shone a light in his eyes and wrapped a cuff around his arm. While the cuff was puffing up, the sound of a door slamming and a baby screaming in the next room over got his attention. He flinched at the sound which earned another grunt from the doctor. His attention was fixed completely on the door, wondering if he could sneak over and peek at what's going on.

He felt the doctor grab at his face, his fingers gripping his jaw firmly turning Seven toward him.

"None of your concern." The man said in a thick accent; so close that Seven could feel his breath hit his face. He nodded his head slowly, and the doctor let go of his face, taking his hand instead. He lifted a tool from a cabinet and pricked Seven's finger without any warning. Seven flinched at the sudden pain, biting the inside of his cheek. At the same time, the baby started up again, and the doctor turned back to his cabinet with a grunt. Seven burned with curiosity; the doctor was busy fiddling with various tools and machines and Seven swung his legs violently for a moment. The crying continued and he Stopped, not able to resist the urge.

He was almost surprised when time holds and doesn't flicker, that meant he was getting better at it and a smile formed on his face. He slipped off the exam table and headed toward the door. The room fell silent and dead with the machines and the baby Stopped, and Seven shivered at the sudden stillness. He stepped into the other room, blood steadily dripping from his nose.

The room was identical to the room he was in, except it was mostly

bare, with only an empty cabinet and a smaller exam table toward the center of the room. There was a guard and a white coat standing over what he assumes is the baby, he couldn't make out what was happening so he inched forward, trying to get a closer look.

The guard was holding the baby so that its arm would be held in place as it moves, and the white coat held a weird-looking needle against its skin, he sees the start of a 0 being drawn and he stepped back, looking at his own number, 007. He wondered which number the baby was, and he counted slowly through the others he knows. He got stuck for a while, but finally settled on eleven. He doesn't remember getting his number drawn on, but it must have hurt, he looked at little Eleven's face - stuck in a scream.

He carefully moved the white coat's hand away, and slowly untangled little Eleven from the guard's grip.

Seven had never held a baby before, but he figured it shouldn't be too hard. He concentrates really hard and tries to pull it in with him so that it can move; he'd never pulled in a person before, but it wasn't too different from pulling in objects and so before he knew it the screaming continued and filled the room that was silent before. Seven awkwardly rocked it back and forth for a few minutes and the screaming quieted itself into loud crying.

"Don't cry." Seven told it, "Makes it worse." He continued, wishing he knew more words to help explain with.

"The bad men," He started, "They hurt, and you can't cry." He bounced on his feet, and Eleven seems to quiet down a little more so he took to bouncing it gently in his arms.

He held Eleven for a while longer, it's crying slowly but steadily grew quieter and quieter. He felt lightheaded from holding time for that long but he didn't want to put it back yet. The moment he put it back, he would have to put time back, and the white coat would hurt Eleven again.

He couldn't hold time for much longer, and he sat carefully on the ground with Eleven sleeping in his arms. He felt tired and worn out, his control of time slipping slowly from his desperate hold on it. He had to keep it as long as he could, for Eleven. He closed his eyes and tightened his grip on it.

He felt himself slip into darkness. He could faintly hear the hum of machines.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Flashback to lil Steve and El, Steve's a natural babysitter lol

## 5. Chapter 5

### Summary for the Chapter:

He wakes up to the worst headache he's ever had and on the third most uncomfortable couch he's ever slept on.

He wakes up to the worst headache he's ever had and on the third most uncomfortable couch he's ever slept on. He groans, his whole body stiff and his head pounding, sitting himself up slowly. He's back at the Byers' house, sitting on their couch with a scratchy blanket draped over him. He can't remember how he got here, only that his powers had fucked up in the tunnels, which was concerning all by itself considering he hadn't ever had that happen before. Then he passed out on the way to his car, and he's pretty sure he didn't get hit hard enough in the fight to warrant fainting like he was some Victorian lady.

"Henderson?" He calls out, slowly moving himself to a shaky standing position, supporting himself on the arms of the couch. It's mostly just his head that's hurting, but there's a slight ache in his chest. He's tempted to test out his powers, so he can see if what happened in the tunnels was a fluke, but he's been on a streak of reasonably good decisions, so he shakes the thought of it off. It'd probably just make him pass out again anyway.

"Steve." He hears Nancy say, and he looks up and then there she is, turning the corner of the hallway, rushing toward him, Jonathan in tow. "Jonathan, help him." She glances behind her, "You look like shit, Steve."

"Feel like it," He responds as Jonathan comes over and offers his shoulder for balance. Steve doesn't realize how much vertigo he's got



until he actually takes that offer. "Got in a fight with Max's brother." He continues, grasping for something to explain himself. She glances at his bruised knuckles. He figures Billy must have gone home since it's mostly quiet and there's no fist in his face. He's thankful for that at least.

"Yeah, the kids told us. I'm just glad you didn't get your ass kicked." Nancy says.

"Nah," He starts, the throbbing in his head slowly fading. "I'm a ninja." He looks at Nancy, his heart hurts a little with the old reference, but he's started to feel some sort of closure with them. She shakes her head, but there's a small smile on her face. Her and Jonathan look exhausted, with matching eyebags and hunched shoulders, he figures they've all had one hell of a day.

"A ninja with a probable concussion," Jonathan adds in, shifting his support shoulder so he can hand Nancy a mini flashlight keychain he digs out from his pocket.

"I don't know, he seems pretty lucid." She replies, taking the keychain. "Look at me, Steve." She says as she proceeds to flash the light from the keychain directly in his eyes. He flinches and lets out a noise of surprise.

"Why else would he just pass out?" Jonathan replies as Nancy continues to try and blind him.

"I'm right here," He starts, "What is that even supposed to do?" He gestures to the flashlight, trying to change the subject. If him being

knocked out had anything to do with his powers being fucked up, he'd rather not have up-and-coming reporter Nancy Wheeler be anywhere near it.

"I don't know, I've just seen people do it before." She says shyly, putting the keychain down, she shakes her head. "I'm sure you're fine, it's just- you just really freaked us out."

"What happened?" He asks, mostly referring to how he got on the Byer's couch.

"You've only been out for a few hours. We got the Mind Flayer out of Will, and we're pretty sure El managed to close the gate; everybody is in Will's room, we're pretty much just waiting for Hopper to get here." Jonathan sums up, glancing down the hall, probably toward where Will is sleeping, if Steve had to guess. He suddenly feels bad about whining over his head, he can only imagine how Will feels after a real-life exorcism.

Jonathan doesn't say anything about how Steve ended up on the couch, but he's too tired to push it. He also feels weird all wrapped up in one of the Byers' throw blankets, considering he's only been to their house like twice before. He shakes it off, considering that there's some of his blood on a smashed plate in their kitchen.

He sighs in relief, he'd have to deal with whatever the weirdness with his powers was later, but the hard part was over with; once everything settled down he would figure out what was going on. Once things go back to being normal, or what qualifies as normal in Hawkins anyway.

"I'm gonna go get my mom, maybe she'll know how to tell if you've got a concussion," Jonathan says, filling the awkward silence that's fallen over the three of them. He just nods. He shifts his grasp on Jonathan's shoulder back to the arm of the couch with minimal dizziness. He considers it a win.

"I'll see if the Byers' have any tea or coffee." Nancy says, getting up, "Or vodka." She adds under her breath. She heads into the kitchen after Jonathan goes to get Ms. Byers. Leaving Steve alone in the living room. He sighs and prepares to hobble his way to the hall himself, figuring he might as well check in on the kids when the door suddenly swings open, slamming against the wall with a bang. He startles, and his head throbs in protest at the sudden loud noise. Nancy isn't much better, since he hears her swear and a glass shatter. She races back into the living room as Hopper comes through the door, his arms full.

"Where's Joyce?" he asks, looking like he's aged ten years in the past hour. It takes a moment for it to register that the thing he's holding is an unconscious El.

He pushes down the urge to go and run over to her and make sure she's alright. The way she dangles from Hopper's arm reminds him too much of Seven holding her as a baby, telling her not to cry. He schools his expression into a normal amount of worry for a girl he's not supposed to know and roots himself to the spot. He takes a deep, shaky breath as Joyce and Jonathan rush out of the hallway toward them, the kids, sans Will, following close behind.

Hopper gently lays El on the couch as the kids run to crowd around her. They all clamor about whether she was okay and what happened.

“What happened?” Joyce asks a little louder, shouldering her way past the kids. Hopper doesn’t take his eyes off of Eleven when he answers.

“She passed out after she closed the gate, I can’t get her to wake up.” He takes a breath and runs his hand through his hair, “Jesus, I can’t even take her to a hospital.” He continues, his voice soft in a way that Steve had never heard from the man before.

“You think she just used her powers too much, like, she knocked herself out?” Mike asks, looking at Hopper.

The chief sighs, “That’s what I’m hoping, kid.”

Joyce puts her hand on El’s forehead, “She’s not too warm. If she overexerted herself, then hopefully she’ll be up by tomorrow.”

Steve flinches, knowing she’s not going to. He glances at El, her skin is overly pale, and there’s dried blood around her nose, ears, and eyes. He winces at the thought she must have strained herself closing the gate. Overexertion wasn’t entirely uncommon, he’d pushed himself too far a lot of times. A lot of the experiments at the lab *made* them push themselves over their limits constantly. So yeah, it was bad, but it never knocked you to the point you can’t wake up, which means whatever was keeping El out was only *partly* exhaustion.

Only, it’s gonna take the others at least until tomorrow when she *doesn’t* wake up to figure that out. He could tell them, but he can’t

think of a single way to try and say it that doesn't involve a ton of suspicion as to why he knows so much about El and her powers.

*Are we sure it's her freaky powers and not like some other weird shit?* Maybe not, it would be a valid suggestion but would also be totally ignored. He's never been one to pay attention to all the science and whatever about the lab and everything, so why would he start now?

*I don't think it's her powers thing, because uh, reasons.* Okay, he's not even trying at that point.

*Hey, I'm also an escapee from the Hawkins lab, and yeah, it's not her powers that are the problem.* Nope, definitely not.

Instead, he just runs a hand through his hair and sighs. Whatever is wrong with her surely couldn't get worse by tomorrow. And maybe it is exhaustion, he'd never overexerted himself closing a weird portal gate thing, there's every chance that he could be wrong.

God, he hopes he's wrong.

"So, you think I should just what, leave her like this, check back tomorrow?" Hopper asks, like Ms. Byers has gone insane.

"Hop, I know you're worried, but we can't get a doctor here, it's late, and there's nothing we can do right now." She responds, her voice low, she puts her hand on Hopper's arm, "She's gonna be okay." She continues. Steve feels like he's intruding on a private moment, but

Hopper just nods and Joyce takes it as a sign to go into mom mode.

“Okay, uh Jonathan can you help the kids get the sleeping bags from the attic so they can sleep in Will’s room? Nancy, could you call your mom for me and tell her that you and Mike are sleeping over? The rest of you also need to tell your parents, the phone is over there.” She says, gesturing around. “Steve, honey, I can only offer you the armchair I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s fine.” He says, not sure he’s even gonna sleep.

Dustin comes and ropes him into helping the kids set up their sleeping area, it goes unspoken that Nancy is sleeping in Jonathan’s bed and he’s surprised that his chest doesn’t ache at the thought. Or that his chest doesn’t ache at all really. He can walk around without feeling like he’s gonna fall over, too, which he figures pretty much means he’s healed. Hopefully.

It takes a while, but the kids all finally pass out for the night, the whole day probably catching up to them. It takes Mike a ton of reassurance from Hopper that nothing would happen to Eleven while he was sleeping to get him to actually even try to sleep. But other than that small hiccup, everybody in the house falls sound asleep. Well, except for Steve, and obviously Hopper. The chief had taken to sitting on the arm of the couch, right next to where El is, his head leaning back against the wall and his hat laying on top of his face; softly snoring.

Steve had sat down on the chair that Ms. Byer’s had offered him for about five seconds before deciding that he wasn’t gonna get any sleep tonight. Instead, he quietly opens the door and slips outside into the cold air. He rummages around his jacket pockets, pulling out a

beaten-up pack of cigarettes, there's only two left and he pulls one out on holds it between his lips. He puts the pack back in his pocket and digs around for his lighter.

It takes almost a full minute for him to remember that he sacrificed it to the tunnels.

“Shit.” He mumbles, leaning against the railing that surrounds the front porch of the house. The wind whistles against the trees and he pulls his jacket a little tighter around himself. He remembers hearing wind for the first time. The walls in the Lab were thick, and it wasn't until he'd gotten out that he even knew what it was.

*Seven had never heard wind before, he really liked the sound of it, the way it rustled the grass. He didn't have a word for it but he loved it. Tommy had called over to him, telling him to come play soccer, which for Tommy just meant an excuse to kick everyone's ankles. The wind shoots the ball into the other goal at the last second. "Doesn't count, it was the wind!" Tommy had said. It was a new word, and Seven- or Steve now, he liked new words. Especially-*

“You gonna light that or what?” a voice says to his right and he flinches, slammed back into the present; an unlit cigarette still sitting between his teeth. The adrenaline starts to fade away and he's glad he didn't Stop when he startled. It's just Hopper, leaning against the railing beside him. He just hadn't heard him over the wind.

“Lost it. The uh, lighter.” He answers, in lieu of the long explanation.

Hopper shifts next to him, and he glances over to see him taking out his own cigarette and lighting it up with an old silver lighter, a branch-like pattern crawling up the side. He holds the lighter out to Steve, "Don't lose this one." He says, blowing out smoke.

Steve blinks, Hopper's *giving* it to him?

"You sure?" He asks, hesitating. The chief just nods, and Steve finally takes it and lights his own cigarette. They both sit for a while, inhaling and exhaling in sync and out of sync at different times.

"Why aren't you sleeping?" Hopper asks after a moment, the wind picking up the smoke he blows out and carrying it all the way over the treeline.

Steve takes a drag to give himself time to answer. "Long day." Is all he can come up with.

"All the more reason." He responds. Steve just shrugs to that and luckily the chief doesn't push the topic.

Instead, they just stand and continue to smoke in silence. Steve's never been good at quiet but he finds he likes this kind. It's easy to let Hopper's large presence wash over the space and he can half convince himself that he's safe, that it's safe right here where he's standing. It steadily gets darker and darker, and the moon climbs higher in the sky. Steve takes one last puff of his cigarette before wordlessly heading inside. He curls up in the Byer's armchair and falls fitfully into a dreamless sleep.



## Notes for the Chapter:

It hasn't been a month since I posted what are you talking about??? But really this chapter was insanely difficult to write and then the past two days I just got some sudden motivation for it, so here we are! Little sidenote, are there any ships that y'all wanna see in this story? I don't really plan on making romance a big part of it, but I wouldn't mind some bg ships or something like that. Let me know pls!! I DO read comments but I'm v shy and have a hard time replying to them but I will try my best with this chapter. :)

## 6. Chapter 6

### Summary for the Chapter:

The one thing he didn't miss about regularly using his powers was the constant bloodstains on his clothes.

His second time waking up in the Byers' house is a lot better than the first. A quick glance at the clock tells him that it's 5 am, which is way earlier than he ever wants to be awake. Usually, if he woke up this early he'd stop and get in as many hours as he could while asleep, and he comes scarily close to following that routine before he jolts up, realizing he should be fully awake before he tests out his powers. He rolls off the armchair and stretches, his joints popping more than they probably should.

The sun is just barely starting to shine through the windows and there are birds starting to chirp outside; it's a nice morning, which only makes him wonder how it's going to go to shit. Or more shit than what's already going on, anyway. El's still passed out on the couch and only slightly less pale than she was when Hopper brought her in. Speaking of, the chief seems to have finally gotten to sleep, lowly snoring next to her, limbs splayed painfully in different directions.

Steve sneaks outside, not trusting Hopper to be a heavy sleeper, and checks to see if there are any cars or people hanging around. Once he's sure he's clear, most people asleep or just getting ready to go work, he takes a deep breath and takes out Hopper's lighter - his lighter now - flicks it open and lights it. The flame sways and flickers in the breeze.

Hesitantly, he stops and everything goes still, including the flame.

He lets out a sudden laugh, filled with relief that the familiar stillness and silence is back, and that foreign, *wrong* feeling is gone. The fire from the lighter looks like a video that's been paused, probably a weird sight to anyone not completely messed up, but to Steve, it's a confirmation that his powers are back to normal. Which really only raises more questions about what the hell happened in the tunnels, but he's still relieved. He lets out a soft breath, letting time settle back into itself. The flame continues, flickering in the wind. He closes the lighter and shoves it back in his pocket before wiping his nose on his sleeve, making a mental note to throw his jacket in the wash later. The one thing he didn't miss about regularly using his powers was the constant bloodstains on his clothes.

He heads back inside. Hopper seems to have stirred, his spot on the couch empty. Though not even two seconds later, he stalks back into the living room, a mug of steaming coffee in his hand.

“Whose blood is on the floor in the kitchen?” He asks tiredly, taking a sip of his coffee. He doesn't question why Steve is up this early, which Steve is thankful for.

“Mine.” Steve admits, having forgot that nobody had updated Hopper on the whole ‘almost getting the kids killed and then passing out’ which means it's up to him to explain it, which is only slightly less scary than the tunnels had been. “Max's brother, uh Billy, came here and we fought.” He continues, swallowing hard. He can't say he's ever talked to Hopper much, in fact, he'd spent most of his life avoiding law enforcement as much as he could. The most he'd ever interacted with him was a few run-ins from noise complaints and then last night when the man had given him the lighter.

Hopper raises an eyebrow, “And?”

Steve sighs and fills him in on the rest of what had happened, wincing nervously when he recounts how he let the kids into the tunnels and how they barely got out. “We got out to the car and I passed out.” He finishes off lamely, shrinking under the chief’s gaze, praying that he doesn’t dig into the whole ‘passing out’ part of the story. That was another reason he usually avoided the man, when something caught his attention, he’d keep trying to solve it. Luckily though, the chief seems to let it go, instead choosing to settle back on the arm of the couch.

“You uh, sleep well?” Hopper asks after a moment, grabbing his hat off the side table.

“Did you?” Steve answers back without thinking. Hopper just chuckles though, shaking his head slightly. There’s another beat of silence, with only El’s soft breathing breaking through the quiet. It feels so awkward between them, a big contrast to last night, that he can taste the tension being broken when Ms. Byers comes in through the hall.

“How’s she doing?” She asks, moving to kneel by El, “Anything change?”

In response, Hopper just shakes his head. Steve winces, on the off chance he was wrong and it was just overexertion, she’d be up by now. He’d hoped he was wrong, but luck was never on his side.

“I need to go back.” Hopper says lowly, talking to Joyce, “To the lab.” Steve fights back a flinch at the mention of his childhood home. Before Ms. Byers can say anything he continues like he’d been thinking all night about what to do, which Steve wouldn’t doubt for a

second.

“I mean, think about it, there’s so much we don’t know about what they actually did there, about El, hell, about all those kids. There’s gotta be something in there that’ll tell me what’s wrong with her.” Hopper finishes, his eyes flicker over to Steve, probably because he hadn’t been planning on a teenager being there to overhear - but Steve’s heart is beating like the man is looking right through him to every part of himself he’s ever tried to hide.

“You think it’s something they did to her?” Mike suddenly cuts in, leading the line of him and the rest of the kids into the living room, with Will surprisingly standing upright, next to him. The kid looks like El, pale and ill, but awake. Ms. Byers goes to fret over him, and he complains but there’s a smile stretching across his face.

Hopper’s mouth sets into a line, “I don’t know what else it would be.” He says calmly.

“Then we have to go!” Dustin says, the other kids shouting their agreement, except Will, who’s still trapped in a hug from Ms. Byers.

“No.” The chief says, shutting them down immediately, “The other higher-ups are gonna be sweeping through that place soon, it’s going to be dangerous, and you all have parents to get back to.”

“That’s such bullshit!” Mike says, “El needs our help, we’re not just gonna leave her now.”

The living room slowly builds into a screaming match, the kids making arguments for why they should go and Hopper shutting them down repeatedly. Ms. Byers jumps in every few minutes to also shut them down, only a bit more gently. Steve just lets them go at it, lost in thought.

Hopper isn't wrong, whatever's happening to Eleven has to do with the lab in some way, it's really the only place to start. All Steve needs to do is somehow get Hopper to let him tag along, or even just follow the man without him knowing, his powers do lend to him being stealthy. The thought of going back to the lab makes him want to throw up, but he could help, he knew the place fairly well and he'd know what he would be looking for. If he could keep it together, he'd be able to help El. He couldn't ever make up for abandoning her, but he could do this for her now.

He looks up at the sudden lack of arguing, the living room quieting down, he thinks maybe one of the sides has won, but instead, it's just Jonathan and Nancy having walked in, probably woken up from all the noise.

"What's going on?" Nancy asks, rubbing her eyes. Jonathan spots Will and goes to fret over him being awake in a scarily similar way to what Ms. Byers did.

"We need to go back to the lab to find out what's wrong with El." Mike explains.

"No, *I* am going to the lab to do some digging, the rest of you are going back to your respective homes." Hopper cuts in, crossing his arms.

“We’ve been in danger this whole time, we wanna help, why kick us out now?” Max says.

“We won’t leave El behind,” Lucas adds, stepping next to Max.

“We’ll all help,” Nancy says, glancing at Jonathan who just nods in response. She turns her gaze to Steve then. He sees his opportunity and he takes it. “Beats studying for chemistry,” he says, shrugging his shoulders, hoping to look as casual as possible. Hopper looks to Ms. Byers with exasperation, but she just shrugs one shoulder.

“Looks like you’re beat.” She sighs, “Will and I will stay and watch her.”

Will just nods, looking too tired to argue. Hopper looks like he’d just been stabbed in the back, which in a way he was, and he hangs his head and sighs for a long time before slowly getting up off the couch. “When we get there, kids will stay in the car, and the rest of you will follow my lead to the letter, understand?”

Mike opens his mouth to argue, but Max slaps her hand over his mouth, hissing at him to take what he can get.

“Anyone not ready in 5 minutes gets left behind,” Hopper adds, heading out the door.

Nancy and Jonathan excuse themselves to go get dressed. Steve slept in his clothes, like most of the kids and Hopper did, so he just goes to the sink and rinses his mouth out a few times to get the morning breath to go away. He runs his hands through his hair, trying to get a semblance of its usual style, failing miserably.

Going out the door, he glances at Eleven, determination setting in. He's gonna get his sister back, no matter what.

The kids are already outside, and as Steve unlocks his car Dustin and Max race toward it, fighting for the passenger seat. Dustin wins, sticking his tongue out at her. Steve doesn't know why they don't ride with Jonathan and Nancy, like he's assuming Mike and Lucas did, but the chief is looking more impatient by the minute so he just plops himself in the driver's seat. He immediately notices that it's been adjusted to be higher, the front pushed forward, his steering wheel is also set low, pushed as far forward as it can go. He quickly adjusts it back before his chest crushes itself between the wheel and seat.

"What happened to my seat?" He asks Dustin, "And put your seatbelt on." he adds. Dustin's eyes widen and he shares a glance with Max in the backseat.

"Well, uh, when you passed out we had to get you back and we were worried-" He starts.

"So worried." Max cuts in.

"And Max is the only one of us who actually driven a car before, so



we figured-” He continues. Steve blanches.

“You drove my car?” He exclaims, spinning around to face Max. She doesn’t look guilty at all, instead just looking right back at him. It startles him then, how much she reminds him of Eight, brash and unwilling to be put down, that he just turns around quietly and starts the car.

After a moment, he puts it into drive, shaking his head. He lets off the brake and starts to follow Hopper’s car, Jonathan following behind Steve. “Next time one of you drives my car, I want you to have a learner’s permit and for me to at least be conscious.”

“Does that mean I get to drive your car again?” Max asks, shifting in her seat.

“Learner’s permit.” He repeats, “And both of you put your seatbelts on.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Ahhh, sorry about the mini break. I started college and after slacking off so much in high school I was unprepared for how busy I am. Please pray for ya biology major.

## 7. Chapter 7

### Summary for the Chapter:

The opening hallway through the door is the first place that's recognizable to him, and his heart starts racing, it's like his past and present are slipping between one another.

He doesn't realize what he's gotten himself into until he's already pulling up at the lab. Dustin, disregarding the meaning of a seatbelt, kept turning around to chat with Max the whole drive. Like they weren't heading toward a highly dangerous place that Steve had never wanted to go back to. But he's fine really, his hands were sweating against the steering wheel and he was pressing his foot on the brake a little too hard at red lights but he's fine. He's fine.

Steve takes his time parking, hoping to stall just a little bit more time before he has to face his childhood home, but the kids practically jump out before he pulls the brake. He sighs, running a hand through his disgustingly greasy hair, he gets a big urge to turn around, go back to the Harrington house and take a shower. It's so tempting his hand starts towards the gearshift but then he remembers El back at the Byer house, lying on their couch, her face so pale and the next thing he knows he's standing in the parking lot, staring up at Hawkins Lab.

The first thought that goes through his head is that It's bigger than he remembers, though he only ever saw part of it, and he was so much smaller last time he was here. Then he was singularly focused on never having to look at the damned building ever again. He manages to tear his eyes away from it just long enough to pop open his trunk and grab his bat. There's dried blood coating almost all of it, and several nails are bent and warped, but just holding it makes the tightness in his chest loosen, and his stomach doesn't feel like he's riding several rollercoasters at the same time. He'd beat the shit

out of the Demogorgon with his bat, he'd most recently protected himself and the kids from demodogs with it. Suddenly, looking up at the lab isn't so terrifying. He's Steve Harrington, not Seven no-last-name, and he's not a little kid anymore.

He slings his backpack over his shoulder and slots the bat into its familiar spot. That taken care of, he jogs over to everybody, already grouped up near Hopper's police truck. Nancy, not surprisingly, has a gun. A pistol fitted in an old-looking leather holster that he figures she must have gotten from Hopper. Jonathan doesn't have a weapon, but he does have his camera hanging around his neck, which is smart but also makes Steve a little nervous. He'd never gotten this close to anything from his past before, especially with other people he actually considers himself close with. And now he's going 0 for 2.

"Alright!" Hopper starts, "Nancy, Jonathan, you stick together no matter what, watch each other's backs. Harrington, you're with me. Anyone too young to drive is to stay in the car, understood?" he finishes, glaring pointedly at Mike, who just rolls his eyes.

"Hang on," Mike says, grabbing a bag from Lucas, "We brought our two-way radios, that way we can stay in touch." He takes one out of the bag and hands it to Nancy, meeting Hopper's eye after a brief pause. "We can help."

The chief nods approvingly, a smirk pulling at the edge of his mouth as he turns away from Mike to stare up at the lab. Dustin jogs over and practically shoves a radio into Steve's hand. He nods at the kid, who gives him a big smile. The dork.

It's heavy in his hand, but he manages to find a spot in his backpack where he can stash it, hopefully, he can hear it and get to it

easily. Despite his earlier thoughts about going in alone, he's feeling incredibly grateful that he didn't.

If seeing the building was one thing, walking through the door is another. He'd never been in the public area, so it's not completely familiar to him. Still, aside from the blood staining the floors and the mess left behind by yesterday, it's startling to see the lab still so alive looking. He didn't think that everything just stopped when he escaped, but he'd thrown it so far to the back of his mind it's hard not to cringe when he knocks into the first familiar staircase. Hopper trails behind him, Nancy and Jonathan having turned down another hallway.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT printed on a plaque on the wall next to the staircase, AUTHORIZED PERSONS ONLY printed smaller below it.

"Up here." He says, swallowing hard. Hopper passes by him, glancing at the other hallway they could go down but instead, he just raises an eyebrow and gets in front of Steve. He trails behind, the hum of the radio in his backpack and the weight of his bat in the backpack keeping him grounded in the moment. The door to at the top of the staircase is giant and metal, locked with a keypad and a place to swipe a badge. Luckily, or maybe unluckily, the door itself is opening and slamming repeatedly against a man's body. Looks like a scientist to Steve, probably caught trying to get out in the chaos.

"Jesus." Hopper mumbles, stepping over it carefully, "Try not to look at it, kid." Steve just nods and doesn't say that it's not the first dead person he's ever seen. They both carefully step over the body and go further into the lab.

Hopper walks ahead, barely sparing a glance back, which Steve couldn't be more thankful for, considering he doesn't think he can move or breathe. The opening hallway through the door is the first place that's truly recognizable to him, and his heart starts racing. It's like his past and present are slipping between one another. He blinks furiously, trying to shake off the sudden dizziness he's feeling, and the lights practically blinding him. When did they get so bright? He rubs his eyes, sweat dripping down his forehead.

*He's so small. He's eight he thinks. It's still confusing, counting and math. He's Seven but he's also eight and nobody will explain the difference to him. He'd just been in his room, drawing, it was fun, and he got to scribble and color outside of the lines and nobody could stop him. But then his door opened, the bad men standing in the doorway. They said that Papa wanted him for some more tests, one of his bad words because it meant the pads that stuck to his head and the things that Papa wanted him to do that he didn't want to. It meant being uncomfortable and sometimes there was screaming that was too loud. So instead of getting up he scoots back into the corner of his room, hugging his knees. They'll have to let it go, just once, he wants to sit and color and that's it! He's been quiet and he'd been good, he shouldn't have to go. He waits, staring warily at the guards that just sigh after a minute, coming toward him. Seven yelps as the first one pulls him up by his arm, yanking him out of the room. The second one shakes their head and follows behind. Seven tugs at the man's grip, but it's too strong. He switches to hitting and biting at the man's arm, but he just gets annoyed.*

*"Stop it, brat." He says, cuffing Seven on the head, "Any chance of some help here, Joe?" He says to the other man.*

*"What? You can't handle a kid?" The man replies, taking Seven's other arm. He pulls back, going limp to try and make himself heavier. Eight would be proud, he thinks.*

*"I don't get paid enough for this." The second man whines. He pulls Seven toward him, the first guard letting go. Seven feels relief run through him, thinking that they're letting him go back to his room. That they've given up. It's short-lived and he feels the breath get knocked out of him as his back slams against the wall, his shoulder taking the brunt of the pain. He squeezes his eyes shut, trying to catch his breath, not seeing the hand come to hit him across the face. His face stings and the man just huffs in annoyance, continuing to drag Seven down the hall.*

*His arm is losing feeling from how tight the man's grip is, and his shoulder is throbbing, and he can taste blood in his mouth, he's so tired and now Papa will be disappointed in him-*

"Steve?" He hears faintly like it's in another room. Is the other guard's name Steve? He doesn't think so, it sounds like a nice name, and the man isn't nice.

"Harrington!" The voice says again, closer this time. It seems familiar, the voice and what it's saying. It's all confusing, the guard's grip is gone but his shoulder is still in agony. He wonders how they keep the hallway so clean with so much blood. There's a hand on his shoulder now and he hisses, expecting pain to shoot through him, but there isn't any and the lights slowly get dimmer. He feels like he's run a marathon.

"Hey, kid, you alright?" Seven hears Hopper ask. His head is pounding and he's so confused. Why was Hopper here?

"I'm fine." He says, the lie tasting like the blood that was just on his teeth. "Sorry, just got distracted." He continues because it sounds right on his tongue. He blinks a few times, his memory sorting itself back into place. He bites back a scream of frustration; he'd just

completely broken down in front of the chief of police. Great. So much for being fine and able to handle being back in the lab.

“That didn’t look like you were distracted,” Hopper says, his hand still on Steve’s shoulder. Steve brushes past him, his hand going back to his bat. He runs his thumb over the wood a few times, clearing his throat. He speed walks, looking for something, anything that would change the subject.

“Looks like there might be something this way.” He says, finding his distraction. He heads toward an old filing room he was never allowed into, if there’s something that could help Eleven, it would probably be in there. He makes a beeline for it, Hopper trailing behind, calling after him. “Huh, look there are files and shit.” He says, not very convincingly throwing open the door, it should be locked, but the keyswipe is busted open and he's glad he doesn't have to loot any dead bodies for a keycard.

“Steve.” The chief says again, firmly this time.

“I’m fine,” Steve says again, a bit more truthful this time, “We need to help El, there’s gotta be something in here.” He continues, probably a little more determined than someone that doesn’t know El should be but he can’t find it in himself to care at the moment.

The room itself looks well kept, file boxes on the left side of the room stacked from the floor to the ceiling, and with luck, they all seem to be sorted and labeled. He doesn’t recognize any of it, given that this room was off-limits when he was a kid, which means that the only thing he can do now is try to make himself useful. He glances through the labels on the boxes, Hopper, with a concerned glance toward him and a grunt, goes to check the other side of the

room, rifling through drawers and file cabinets not as well labeled as the boxes. There's a lot of potential on Steve's end, different boxes labeled with different code names for projects, and various experiment titles. He goes from stack to stack, looking specifically for anything about what they did to him and the rest of the kids from the lab.

He lands on a pile that seems promising, grabbing and opening a box from the earliest date that's written, whatever happened to him and El would most likely be something from when he was too young to remember. He sneezes from the sudden dust underneath the lid and he flips through the files. Most of them are from what looks like the first batch of kids the lab lovingly took in, kids 1-4. Steve doesn't remember any of them and judging by the dates on the unofficial death certificates they all met tragic ends before he was even born. Either way, he can't find anything useful in the first box so he moves on, trying to imagine the kids like the lab did, as just numbers, not as him or his siblings or actual human beings.

The second box, after another lungful of dust, looks like it'll give up a lot more information than the first. He's just read through the first few pages when Hopper goes quiet for a minute, the ruffling of papers having stopped. Steve glances up, seeing the chief intensely going through a file.

"Holy shit," the man says. Before waiting for an invitation, Steve hops up from his uncomfortable sitting position to see what he found, praying that it didn't include lucky number seven.

"What is it?" He asks, going to stand next to Hopper. He'd laid a file on the table, multiple papers spread around complete with trademark coffee stains and dog-eared corners. Steve glances over them, stilling.



“There’s a list, keeping track of every kid that came out of Project Ultra. El wasn’t the first kid to get out.” The chief says, pointing at a paper in the very front of the folder. Steve stills, and picks it up.

Subjects 1-4: Expired after numerous, dangerous, tests. Dr. Hanson requested to be on record with a report warning Dr. Brenner of the expected result, testing was continued despite the warning. Status: DECEASED.

Subjects 5-8: After improvements to the experiment subjects were raised successfully.

Subject 5: Attempted to escape, was eliminated to ensure the classified nature of the experiment stayed intact. Status: DECEASED.

Subject 6: Eliminated a year later due to similar circumstances, though elimination was NOT deemed a necessary procedure, Guard [REDACTED] was terminated due to this failure. Status: DECEASED.

Subject 7: Escaped, units were deployed through Hawkins and at town borders, it has been determined the subject at the time of escape had not left Hawkins, due lack of new information, the active search for subject 7 has been delayed until further notice. Status: UNKNOWN.

Subject 8: Attempted escape with subject 9 and managed to evade units. Subjects are determined to have left Indiana. Subject 8’s active search has been delayed until further notice. Status: UNKNOWN.

Subject 9: Severely injured in escape. Status: PRESUMED DEAD.

Subject 10: Moved to another testing facility for further experimentation, location [CLASSIFIED]. Status: ALIVE.

Subject 11: [CLASSIFIED, ONLY ACCESSIBLE TO DR. MARTIN BRENNER] Status: [REDACTED]

“Huh.” He says, his mouth going dry, feeling like the air just up and left his lungs. He knows he should be more concerned about *his* section, but he just keeps reading Eight’s section over and over again. He’d known the other kids of course, but he and Eight were close. They practically raised El when she was a baby, knowing that the lab would just fuck her up like it had to them. After he’d left, he’d pushed all thought of the others away, not wanting to know what happened to them, it’d been much easier to assume they were dead and just completely become Steve Harrington.

But now...there’s actual proof right in front of him that Eight is alive. It feels like the best news he’s ever gotten and also the most crushing weight he’s ever felt.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hey y'all! I went back and forth a bit over this chapter, so hope you like it! Please stay safe and stay home if you can.

## 8. Chapter 8

### Summary for the Chapter:

His heart is jackhammering in his chest, he's praying that Hopper isn't going where he thinks he's going. Every cover story he's ever forced himself to learn immediately comes back after years of not needing them.

He's been staring at the file for way too long to not be suspicious at this point.

His body has gone completely still, despite all his instincts screaming at him to run. It feels like when he saw El all over again, the reality that she was finally out of the lab and safe slamming itself against his chest until he can't breathe. Along with the relief flooding through him, there's also a lot of anger. The fact that Eight didn't come to find him to tell him that she was alive, that she was safe.

He was gonna kill Eight when he found her, either that or she would kill him for leaving her behind all those years ago. Really, they both had some explaining to do. But first, he had to get out of the lab and help El, preferably without revealing himself to Hopper like a dumbass which he hasn't been doing a great job so far. So he tears his eyes away from the file. Hopper thankfully went through the rest of the drawers while Steve was preoccupied, and given the state of the papers scattered around the floor, none of them were useful.

"I found a box," Steve finally says, swallowing hard, heading toward the box he was looking through before his life was turned upside down for the fourth time this week. "It had some stuff about the uh, smaller projects I guess. Looked useful." He picks it up with a grunt and walks over to slam it down onto the table next to the file.

Hopper nods at him and goes to work using whatever police method he uses to find information to sort through it - which apparently involves throwing papers on the floor. Steve meanwhile returns to *the* file, trying to subtly find *his* more in-depth report in the thick of it. Hopper had been silent after the revelation about the other kids from the lab. The idea of other kids besides El was something Steve knew everybody was aware of, but it had just been an idea, a hypothetical. But now that Hopper has proof of it, that he's definitely going to share with the others, well, Steve's just lucky that he'd done a ton of work at the start to make it seem like he came to Hawkins naturally.

Well, his ID is fake and he doesn't have a social security number, but other than that at least. He is also lucky that his page is right next to Eight's and that he's able to pull out her page, pretending to just be reading, and he's able to slip his page underneath the table with his other hand. He folds it up a few times and quickly stuffs it into his pocket. The more information about him that the lab *and* the chief can't find, the better. He does actually browse Eight's page but it doesn't tell him anything he doesn't already know, so he sets it back down.

"We're gonna have to take this." Hopper says finally, gathering up the files and papers to put in the box, including the file that Steve was looking at. He slumps in relief that they're leaving, putting an end to the worst walk down memory lane he's ever had. After this, it's just figuring out what the hell happened to Eleven and then damage control for all the times he's acted suspiciously on this trip. Hopper picks up the box and sets it down by the door, before pausing in the doorway. "Unless, you think we should check anywhere else," he adds, staring at Steve weirdly.

So much for damage control.

Steve looks at the chief confused, the tone of the question is off-putting, but he's not about to feed into wherever Hopper is going with this. "Why would I know? I mean we could check if Nancy and Jonathan found something..." He says, taking the radio out of his backpack to talk to them with, but Hopper interrupts before he can even push the button.

"Kid, I'm a cop, you think I haven't noticed how you've been acting?" Hopper starts, his voice low, and Steve's blood runs cold. "You jumped at the chance to go here, but the minute you enter the building you look like you wanna leave."

"What, you're saying this place doesn't creep you out?" Steve responds, gesturing vaguely around. His heart is jackhammering in his chest, he's praying that Hopper isn't going where he thinks he's going. Every cover story he's ever forced himself to learn immediately comes back after years of not needing them.

The chief just continues, like he didn't even hear him. "I know what a bad memory looks like - and in the hall, you were shaking like a leaf. You passed out near the same time El did but you don't have a concussion. And just now-"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Steve cuts him off, taking a step back.

"And, just now, with that file. You didn't even blink when I said that there were others like El that got out of here." He continues, "Because you already knew."

“Are you insane?” Steve stalls, his eyes flicking toward the door, Hopper is blocking part of it, but there’s just enough room to make it past if he stops. He’ll be able to make it, Steve knows the lab better than him, he won’t even have to stop for a long time.

The kids will still be in his car so that’s out, but hotwiring is like riding a bike, he’ll be able to pick another one up easy enough. Then he’d just have to ditch it once he’s far enough out of Hawkins, and it’s not like his ID was that hard to get a hold of. It would be easy enough to start over. He shouldn’t even have stayed in Hawkins so long, it was stupid of him to get attached, to this town, to Nancy, to this life. But he’s only a year off from being an adult now, if he runs, he can start over somewhere, maybe even start looking for Eight.

But then he thinks of El, pale and lifeless on the Byers’ couch, and how he can’t leave her, not again.

The chief must notice him looking carefully toward the door frame and the way his hands are shaking. If Steve feels like a cornered animal, he most certainly looks like one.

The man suddenly relaxes, putting his hands up in a calming gesture, stepping aside so that he’s not blocking the door anymore. “Shit kid, I didn’t- I’m not gonna hurt you or turn you in. I’m sorry for coming at you like that, it’s just- I need to know if you know anything else that can help El. Okay? Please.”

Steve hesitates, he looks genuinely sorry, and he almost feels bad for doubting him. He lets out a breath. It’s now or never. Keep denying and run or give in and tell the truth? On one hand, he’d been

keeping this secret for six years and the minute the lab gets wind that he's alive they'll come after him. On the other hand, Hopper had been keeping Eleven safe for a year, and from what little Steve's seen the chief has been more of a father to her than Brenner had ever even tried to be.

"Come in, this is Mike, we've got company!" Mike's voice yells as the radio fizzles to life in Steve's hand. He throws it to Hopper before he grabs his bat off the back of his backpack, grateful for the distraction. He knows that Hopper won't just let this go, but at least he's got a little time to figure out what the hell he's gonna do about it.

"Where?" Hopper says into the radio, grabbing the box on the ground with his other hand before heading out the door, Steve right behind him, his heart still beating at a million miles an hour. He's almost grateful that their exit isn't gonna be clean, since it cut off the one thing that Steve had been dreading for the past six years.

"We see them, they're blocking the front entrance," Nancy says, whispering into the radio, most likely because she and Jonathan are too close to the men with guns; given that Nancy couldn't stay out of trouble for longer than two minutes.

"If you can, head back towards us, we're gonna need to find another exit," Hopper tells her.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hey y'all, it's been a while. Took a break to focus on finals and then once that was over I got slammed with writer's block. But here we are!

## 9. Chapter 9

### Summary for the Chapter:

Instead, they're all trapped and he'll have been the one that had gotten them killed. The kids, Jonathan, Nancy, even Hopper. All because he'd been selfish, wanting to cling to the normal life he'd built for himself.

Moving quickly through the lab hallways, constantly looking over his shoulder for danger is an easy enough pattern for Steve to fall back into. At least he's got a weapon and a cop on his side this time around, though he'd take not being here in the first place so that he can get out of the worst nostalgia trip of his life.

He and Hopper run further and further into the labyrinth of white walled-hallways, some of which are familiar and some that are completely new. Steve didn't realize how cramped his childhood was until now, especially when compared to the always empty and gigantic Harrington house. That family was the biggest stroke of luck he had ever had. Some rich kid running away, leaving an empty house and absent parents that send checks every month? It was one of the reasons he'd stayed in Hawkins after that first year of hiding in a barn and stealing hotdogs from the gas station.

If he could get some of that luck now, maybe he could get everyone out of the lab alive.

"Wait." He whispers to Hopper. There are faint footsteps slowly making their way toward them, coming from the right hallway. Hopper stills, carefully setting the box down.



The footsteps seem too light to be guards, but Steve holds himself back from calling out, not in the mood to announce himself just in case. He carefully plants himself against the wall and peeks around the corner, his hand gripped around his bat, ready to strike. He lets out a slow breath, willing his heart to settle back into his chest.

He slumps in relief, at the sight of Nancy and Jonathan, crouched and moving slowly through the hallway. Nancy is in the front with her gun held low to the floor. He takes his hand off his bat and comes out from behind the wall slowly. It'd be really embarrassing to get shot by his ex-girlfriend.

"Steve." Nancy stands up, holstering her gun. "Thank god, there's an exit down there." she points behind him. An exit sign hangs from the ceiling. After a brief thank-god-nobody-is-dead celebration, they move swiftly towards the exit. There's no hesitation in pulling open the doors, staring at their way out.

Except that all four of the kids stare back at them, just for a second, before bolting inside and slamming the exit doors shut behind them.

"What part of staying in the car do you *not* understand?" Hopper says after a beat of silence, and Steve can practically see the man's headache forming - though he's close behind on that front, considering his count of people to keep safe just went up and their escape options just went down.

"Lecture later. We need to run, now!" Max shouts, looking back at the door worriedly. The rest of them get the memo quickly, thundering footsteps from behind the door. Steve had thought that sneaking around earlier had been a flashback to his escape, but now that they're full-on sprinting from bad men with guns it's far too close

for comfort.

After a moment of dead sprinting down the halls, there's a haven of double doors staring them in the face, and Steve speeds forward, throwing them open and holding them for everyone to get inside. It's not an exit, but it's a wide-open room. An examination and experimentation room if his memories serve him right, and unfortunately they usually do.

The room is giant, with two sets of stairs that are useless to them since they only lead up and further into the experimentation wing. There's also a lot of fancy equipment scattered around, various testing modules, medical-looking tools, and other furniture. Their saving grace is another set of double doors, which Steve is very aware of being able to lead to the garages.

"There." He yells, pointing towards it. The kids are closest and they move to open it.

Warning bells sound start to blare and the door locks before they can get to it, a lockdown shield slamming down from the top to close them in. Muttering every curse word he can think of, he and Jonathan quickly move a desk in front of the door they came from, Nancy and Hopper adding another in front for more support. They can all tell it won't hold for long, the footsteps getting closer by the second.

"There's no other way out!" Dustin screams, banging uselessly on the closed door. Max and Lucas are desperately tugging up from the bottom trying to get it to unlock. Jonathan scouts the stairs but shakes his head, the lockdown shields blocking them. The sound of the guards breaking down the door gets louder and louder, the metal

denting from the sheer force. Hopper stands pointedly in front of all of them, Nancy stood just to his left, and both of them stare at the door, their guns raised.

Two pistols against at least twenty machine guns. Steve pulls out his bat, but he knows that this is the end of the line.

He swallows, trying to settle the large rock of guilt that's dropped to his stomach like lead. He could have just taken charge and led them out, secret be damned. He could have stopped everything and had them get out the goddamn front door. Instead, they're all trapped and he'll have been the one that had gotten them killed. The kids, Jonathan, Nancy, even Hopper. All because he'd been selfish, wanting to cling to the normal life he'd built for himself. As if that hadn't already been thrown out with the Demogorgon. He'd abandoned Eight for a normal life, he'd abandoned Eleven, and now he's getting them all killed for it.

The guards make some headway, the door slammings into the desks multiple times, steadily shoving them out of the way. Steve makes a choice and he prays he doesn't regret it. He knows what he has to do.

The desk is thrown out of the way, skidding across the floor, and the men make their way in, with no hesitation as they lift their guns and shoot.

Time Stops.

Everything freezes and it's silent. The familiar peace and stillness surround him, but he can't afford to waste any time, so he focuses on

pulling the others in. Taking only a second to mourn his secret.

“What’s happening?” Mike asks first, looking around wildly, the others gasping in similar shock. Steve’s not sure exactly how long he can hold this for, considering he’d dragged the others in with him. Maintaining two timestreams isn’t easy, and he’s not fond of the headache he’ll have, especially considering all the questions he’ll have to answer after this.

He slots his bat back into his backpack and runs straight toward the frozen guards, guilt settling in him again when he sees how close the bullets got to Hopper and Nancy. Swallowing it down, he lets the adrenaline guide him as he snaps the first’s guards’ ID from its place on his chest. He spins around and runs toward the door the kids were uselessly tugging on.

“Steve?” Nancy says, her eyes wide, “You - you’re bleeding-”

He wipes his nose on his sleeve, “I will explain everything later, I promise, but I cannot keep this up for long, so can we please get away from the guys with guns first?”

Hopper is the first to break away from the trance the others are in, which isn’t surprising, given that the man had already figured him out. Though he figures the time-stopping thing had to be new. Jonathan follows next, which is surprising but there’s no time to dwell on it.

He swipes the ID card against a sensor built into the wall that isn’t marked, relieved that he remembers it’s there for the override. He

sets his hand on the door and focuses on letting it in, letting time flow normally for it. It flies open, revealing a familiar hallway. He wonders if it's poetic, going out the same way he did the first time, or if he's just dumb to have gotten himself in the same situation twice now.

"You have powers, like El." Mike finally says, the group breaking their stunned daze to follow him out, jogging through the hallway.

"Awesome." Dustin adds, helpfully. Steve's glad he's in front so nobody can see the small smile that breaks out on his face.

"This whole time and you never told me?" Nancy asks softly from behind him, with anger just underneath it. Her wrath was not exactly something he wanted to experience. And she's definitely the kind of person to hold a grudge.

"It's this way." He says since he can't think of anything else, leading them all to the garage. All he has to do is steal a truck and get them out of there, and then he can let time go. Then, figure out what the hell he's gonna do next. That's a problem for future Steve. There's a headache starting to form and he can feel his nose start to bleed again. He hasn't even been holding time for that long, but he'd also pulled in seven other people into timelessness with him.

"Where are we heading?" Hopper asks, Steve glances back to see the man had stowed his gun and thankfully remembered the box they all almost got killed for. He's almost grateful the man had figured him out beforehand so that there was at least somebody that can focus.

“There’s a garage through this door, we’re stealing a truck and getting the hell out of here. Me, for the uh, second time.” He adds, for a quick confirmation of what the others already knew. He’s never gonna be able to spin this to look like anything but the truth.

His headache slowly grows from the back of his skull from an ache to pounding, and he picks up the pace. If he drops his hold too early, they’re fucked. They head through the door, the giant garage, and at least ten trucks lined up. The exit is relatively secretive so there’s only a couple of guards coming in this way, all frozen in place.

“Why can’t we just go around and get in our own cars?” Jonathan asks as Steve heads toward one of the trucks.

“They’ll already be bugged and tracked.” He answers, not even mentioning surrounded. “They probably already were,” Considering the way all their lives had already been entangled with the lab, “After today they’ll be looking for you. Well, and me; but my car isn’t registered so they aren’t looking for Steve Harrington at least.” He rambles, as they all scramble to get in the truck, Steve personally climbing into the driver’s seat. He immediately breaks open the access panel underneath the steering wheel and takes a deep breath, wiping his nose on his sleeve, again.

It’s been a while since he’s hotwired a car, but it comes back easy. His hands work fast as he singles out the ignition wire and the battery wire.

“Nancy, I need a knife.” He says, glancing toward the backseat. His assumption that she has one on her pays off as she hands him a small pocket knife. He strips the wires and twists them together, focusing on the truck like he did with the door earlier, pulling it in.

The car turns on, the lights and radio coming to life. He takes another wire and strips it, touching it to the other ones. The engine turns and he immediately puts it in drive, peeling out of the garage. He drives as fast he can, swerving around various fences and Stopped guards to get onto the main road.

“Where’d you learn how to hotwire a car?” Dustin says from the very back, there aren’t enough seats for all of them so the kids are sitting in the back, close to where Steve had hidden when he escaped the first time. An upgrade at least, from the trunk to the driver’s seat.

“From a kid in eighth grade.” He answers truthfully, the same kid had also taught him how to pick locks and get a fake ID. He’d been lucky that illegal activity was a cool thing for teens to do. Otherwise, he would have been in serious trouble since he wouldn’t have all the skills he had now.

“Is that the same kid that used to steal from the police station?” Jonathan asks.

“Who did what now?” Hopper says, turning around from the passenger seat.

“He’s in prison now.” Nancy finishes. Steve almost laughs, but he feels horrible. Time is really straining against him now, trying to force itself back in place. It’s grating on him, the longer he holds it the more it feels like he’s trying to stop a car going 90 by holding onto the back bumper.

He had gotten them a big head start out of the lab, his foot practically going through the floor on the gas pedal, but he holds on just a bit longer. Just until the lab fades out of view and he lets himself let go, and time snaps back into itself like he's lost a game of tug-o-war. He's way too strained to ease the transition so instead of gently settling, time roughly shoves its way back into place, eager to flow correctly again. Good for it, but bad for Steve, who feels like he's got whiplash. Glancing around the truck, he can see the others feel similarly, and he winces.

Wiping the last bit of blood on the sleeve of his jacket, which is completely ruined now, he slows down to the speed limit and starts toward the Byer's house. Looking around for a car to swap with this one on the way.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

As an apology for the long wait, I give you a big 2k word chapter. Which isn't really that big since I've read some really long fanfics but I mean for me it's a lot. Anyway, hope y'all are having a good day!



## 10. Chapter 10

### Summary for the Chapter:

El dreams in fragments.

El dreams in fragments. Bits and pieces of memories float by, along with visions she doesn't recognize.

Visions of herself but older, hair long and beautiful. It's not a curled mess that just sits on top of her head, but instead, it's like Nancy's or even Max's. Pretty. The vision pales when she thinks of Max, dragging her to her memory where Max was with Mike. Reliving knocking the girl off her skateboard is just as satisfying a second time. Max already got to go to school and have a family, she shouldn't be able to take Mike too. Mike is the one who taught Eleven about friendship, and about promises.

*Without him*, something in her mind whispers, *she'll be alone, it'll be like she's going back **there** and she can't go back there*. She won't. Eleven has friends now, and she has Hopper and she gets to watch TV and she's not scared anymore and she's *safe*.

She's normal, and every day she waits until she can go to school and see her friends. She wants to only use her powers to do fun things like change TV channels and slam doors and not anything else. She wants to have more words to say things with. She wants to be pretty like Max and Nancy.

Nancy is so different from El's sister. Kali is so grown up, but she's still the same, the same that she was when she was *there*. Nancy gets to be strong and grown-up but she's still pretty, she gets to pick up a gun and then put it down when everything is over. Kali's still so

angry, and she doesn't put her gun away like Nancy does. Is that what El is going to grow up to be? She really doesn't want to be angry anymore. She wants to hold Mike's hand and live in the cabin with Hopper but not have to hide anymore. She wants to bike to school with Lucas and laugh with Dustin. She's tired of hiding, and she wants to forget about Papa and about what she did and...

The thought slips away as easily as it comes. Her dreams drift again because she can't forget, her mind won't let her, and she's dropped back there.

She's not afraid of Papa anymore, hates that she still calls him Papa, but she can't think of him as anything else. Hopper had explained once, only a bit after he took her in. What the word really means. It's amazing, she remembers thinking, that there are so many words to describe one thing. Someone who protects you and loves you and teaches you things.

She'd got out a piece of paper and hid it in her room. She spent a few days thinking about what Hopper told her, trying to think if anyone did that for her. She knew the answer, but it made her sad. Papa never cared about her, but Kali and Seven did.

El never got to see the other kids in the lab very much, she had met 10 and 12 once or twice. Got to talk to some of the others. But Kali and Seven were different. They would sneak around and bend the rules. They took care of her, even if she didn't really know it at the time.

She really misses them. Kali had been different back then, still strong and angry, but there was something different. El wonders if it's because Seven wasn't there with her. It was hard to remember a

time when they weren't together. When he was there, at least. After...El still had Eight, but it was different.

Different memories float by. She grabs at one she likes.

*Her, Seven, and Eight were all in the library, it was late, but Eight had snuck them in. There wasn't a lot of books in the library, it was just a bleak playroom, with one shelf and a table in the corner. Eleven was settled in the center of the room sitting cross-legged, Seven sprawled out across from her while Eight was stood, leaning against the table in the corner.*

*Seven held a small book in his hands, Eleven couldn't read yet but there was a big picture of a duck on the cover. Seven opened it and read the pages in his head first before repeating it aloud. He stumbled over the pronunciation and struggled to explain what all the different words meant to Eleven, but she was happy all the same. It wasn't long until they were near the end of the story.*

*"C-Confused, the ugly duckling wand-er-ed to the water and..." Seven read, trailing off like he did when he was working over a word in his head.*

*"Peered." Eight said, glancing at the book over Seven's shoulder. "Like...looking."*

*"-Peered at his re-reflect... reflection. Much to his sure-prize, he was not an ugly duckling...for he was not a duck at all! He was a bee- a bee ow..." Seven wordlessly lifted the book so Eight could see.*

*“Be...Bee ooh-tie-ful.” She sounded out, and Seven continued.*

*“He was a beaut-tie-full white...swan with a long and ellygant neck.”*

*Eight stood straighter, recognizing her time to come back in, and she conjured a duck.*

*Eleven looked over at the vision happily. The duck waddled over to a little pool of water, and Eight turned it into a pretty swan. Eleven giggled as quietly as she could.*

*“He en-ent-entered the water and joined his new f...fam-family.” Seven read, as Eight created the scene as best as she could, all the swans swimming together.*

*“One day, as the swans were swim-swimming, a man and his...why...why...wife came str-strolling by with their chilled-”*

*“Child.” Eight corrected, adding the couple to the vision.*

*“-Child. The swan rec...recognized this c...cup...cup-lay as the fa-farmer and his wife. They app...approched-ed the edge of the pond and bee-gan to feed the swans bread-crumbs.”*

*Eleven smiled, as Eight played out the scene, the farmer and his wife*

*throwing breadcrumbs at the pond. Eight couldn't do the whole story, her visions flickering in and out every so often, taking breaks every other page.*

*"The farmer looked at the once ugly duckling and sad-"*

*"Said."*

*"Said, it looks like you found your-yourself a...nice...a nick..." Seven held up the book again. Eleven didn't mind the interruptions, it just meant she got more excited to see what would happen. So she waited patiently as Seven and Eight tried to figure out the word.*

*"Nich- nice...ne...I don't know..." Eight said, wiping blood from under her nose.*

*"-Nick, a family." Seven went on, using his best guess. "You are the most bee-oo-tyful swan I have ever seen. For the rest of his days the swan live-ed hap...happily with his new swan family and was gree-greeted of ten by the farmer and his family."*

*Seven closed the book, and Eleven stared at the vision of the swans swimming together in the lake. Eight closed her eyes and the farmer and his wife waved at the swan family one last time before she let the vision go. Both families fading, leaving only the white walls. Eleven had drawn nothing but swans for the next week, sometimes adding in the farmer and his wife.*

The memory leaves quickly, and El feels empty after.

She understands why Eight fought back so much, and she understands why Seven had taken his chance to leave. She's older now, and looking back on what they did for her makes her angry. Every time they would stand in front of her, or hide her, or yell and scream so that she could seem better in comparison. They had taken care of her. She just didn't know it then, even after they both left. They got the chance to, and Eleven didn't. Instead, she was brought into the testing room more and more, and then the bath and she had wanted to cry.

But then she got her chance to leave and she took it. It all fell into place then, she understood completely - because she's incredibly terrified, but also so happy.

Selfishly, El wants them back. Even the Kali that seems so much different than Eight.

She's floating and everything is floating around her, she puts everything into wanting that back and she drifts into darkness except it seems different. Like the familiar kind when she saw Mike on the radio, or when she talked to her mother. It's the dark that means something, that she's somewhere else. It's finally some kind of control, and she almost cries because she's so happy about it. She walks in the darkness for forever, until her feet hurt. She passes by so many things she doesn't understand until she finds something she does.

It's Kali, sitting in her van, she's looking right through El, parked somewhere that she can't see.

“Kali.” She says softly, fresh off the memory of when she was younger. She jumps a bit when her voice actually comes out through the van’s radio, warped and full of static, but clear enough to make out.

“El?” Kali responds immediately, sitting up straighter, hand going out to mess with the radio before thinking better of it and pulling back.

“Help,” El says, not knowing what else to say. She’s starting to float again, and she clings desperately to where she is. She doesn’t want to float anymore. She wants to wake up. Kali used to help her. She could help her now, she could help her come back so she could make waffles and watch movies with Hopper. So she can see her friends again.

“Please.” Is all she can get out before the familiar darkness leaves and she floats away, into more memories and visions.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Me: Starts writing a dbh fanfic

My common sense: You haven't even updated your stranger things fic?? Shouldn't you do that first??

Me: :(

Obligatory sorry for the wait, genuinely have no excuse but still! I originally had a different memory/ flashback for this chapter but it wasn't that different from the other flashbacks I've had, so I wrote a cute memory instead. OwO

Also, I know Kali escapes the lab after Eleven (at least I think, I'm going off the wiki bc I refuse to

rewatch the Kali ep of s2) but I control the canon now, and I say that Kali escaped before Eleven! (Mostly because it doesn't make sense to me that in s1 they didn't show any other kids in the lab except El? So it gave me the impression that she was like the last one left. The laws of time are mine and they will obey me.)



## 11. Chapter 11

### Summary for the Chapter:

“Okay, I’m taking questions for the next-” He glances at his car clock, calculating the distance they are from the Byers’ house, “-five minutes.”

They ditch the car.

Steve pulls off at the nearest gas station on the way to the Byer’s house. They all climb out while Steve tears out the car battery and chucks it into the first patch of tall grass he sees. Nancy slashes the tires for good measure. There’s a truck parked out back behind the gas station, which is practically empty anyway. So while the kids make the chief reluctantly turn around, (while he mumbles about how he’s been *involved* with the illegal things they’ve been doing, so this really isn’t a big deal.) Steve hotwires a car for the second time that day and they all climb back into the new vehicle.

The roads are pretty empty, and there’s no one following them, so he can finally let himself relax. Or at least, he could if the tension in the truck wasn’t enough to put him on edge. He can practically hear the confusion radiating from everyone now that they’re all relatively safe. He sighs.

“Okay, I’m taking questions for the next-” He glances at his car clock, calculating the distance they are from the Byers’ house, “-five minutes.” He says, not really addressing anyone in particular. He’s almost curious to see who’ll jump on him first.

“Thank god,” Max exclaims with no hesitation, practically slamming herself against the front seats. “So you have powers like El? And

you've been hiding them this entire time?"

"Yes and yes," Steve replies, only slightly put off by the kid's eagerness, he is thankful for the first few questions at least being softballs.

"And you can stop time?" Lucas asks.

"Obviously," Dustin says, elbowing his friend.

"Yeah, that's basically it," Steve confirms.

"You've been in school with us for like forever, but the government, they never caught you? In the same town?" Jonathan says.

"Yeah, how *have* you been hiding in Hawkins this entire time?" Nancy asks, Steve can see her shifting forward in the rearview mirror.

"Faked documents and a shit ton of luck." He says automatically, before deciding that it's not really an answer. "The uh, real Harrington kid ran away a long time ago when he first got here. Then there was just this gigantic empty house owned by parents that sent checks but never visited." He continues, his hands gripped tight around the steering wheel.

"I really didn't plan on staying in Hawkins, but it was too good to pass up." Steve continues, wincing, he never really considered how

much that makes him look like an asshole. It seemed like survival at the time, but he never even wondered where the real Harrington kid went. If he's even still alive.

"Wait, so you just what, stole the real Steve's identity?" Jonathan speaks up.

"What?" Steve sputters, "No, that kid's name was like, Josh or something. My name *is* Steve. Kinda like how Eleven's name is El."

"You could pick your name and you chose *Steve*?" Dustin chimes in, as delightfully as ever.

"Hey!"

"Speaking of El," Mike interrupts, and Steve hears a small yelp that sounds distinctly like Dustin being elbowed in the side. "Did you know her? Like from... before?" Mike asks, mirroring Hopper's question from earlier in the lab almost exactly. Say what you want about the two of them, they both really do care about his sister. It would almost be reassuring if it didn't lead to him constantly being interrogated.

*They would keep her safe, a small voice in the back of his head whispers, if you wanted to leave they would take care of her, you know they would.*

*Shut up.* He thinks.

“Yeah, but she was young, she probably doesn’t remember me.” He says.

“Even if she doesn’t, she deserves to know,” Hopper says quietly, and a quick glance in the rearview mirror shows Mike nodding his head aggressively.

Steve swallows. Right, the whole telling Eleven the ‘hey I’m your brother and I left you and I’ve been here right here the entire time.’ thing. He honestly doesn’t know where to start with that. She’d probably be pissed, and she’d have the right to be.

“I know.” He responds. The car goes quiet as he pulls up to the Byer’s house, parking as far around the back as he can, hiding it from view. Someone’s going to report their car missing sooner or later, and he’d rather not add that to the list of things he’s got to worry about.

The house looks the exact same as when they left it, which seems obvious, except that it feels like Steve’s whole world has been flipped upside down. Although that seems to happen more than it probably should.

Glancing over to El on the couch, she looks peaceful, like she’s just sleeping normally and not in some kind of magical coma. She’s not so pale anymore, and her breathing isn’t as shallow. He’s not a doctor or anything, but it’s a good sign. He notices just then that Will is sitting on the floor in front of the couch, his head leaned back on the cushion. He was probably dozed off, but he opens his eyes and perks his head up at the noise of everybody coming through the door.

Ms. Byers must hear the noise too, because she comes out to the living room.

“How’d it go? Did you find anything?” She asks Hopper, her eyes briefly flickering toward El.

Hopper lifts the box to show her and then sets it down on the coffee table, “Good news, bad news.”

“Bad news,” Joyce responds immediately.

Hopper sighs and lifts the lid of the box, throwing it on the floor. Will scooches towards it curiously. “Bad news is we barely got out and they’re not gonna stop looking for us anytime soon. Good news, this-” He gestures to the box of files, “-should give us the answers we need to wake El up.”

“What do you mean looking for you, can’t you just talk to them, work out another deal?” Ms. Byers asks.

“Y’know how they would go through hell or high water for El? Because of her powers, because she grew up there? Steve,” He pauses, “got us out of there, and now they’re just as much on his scent as they are El’s.”

Her eyes widen and Steve can hear a faint gasp from Will, who

looks up at Mike. The kid nods and Dustin jumps in, taking the opportunity to catch Will up, recounting the story quietly between them.

“You grew up there, a-and you have the same- like the powers?” Joyce sputters, turning her head toward him.

“Not the exact same but, yeah,” Steve replies awkwardly, resisting the urge to fidget.

“I didn’t even- how many of you are there?”

“There were eleven of us.” He replies, “Only a few left now.” He continues, thinking of the file he read at the lab.

She softens at that, nodding. “Okay well, come sit, if you used your-” She motions randomly at the air, “Your power to get everybody out, with everything going on you must be tired, so sit down,” She lays her hand gently on his shoulder and guides him to the empty spot on the couch near where El is curled up. “I’ll get you a glass of water,” She looks up and addresses all of them now, “Let’s get to work on the files, if we all help then we can probably get through it before we have to send the kids back to your parents for dinner.”

Mike opens his mouth as if to protest that, but Lucas elbows him, whispering something.

As Ms. Byers goes into the kitchen, Hopper digs into the box, handing out files randomly. Joyce comes back and hands him a glass of water and he thanks her.

His file doesn't have anything of interest, but he reads it over at least three times to make sure. There's a lot of technical science jargon in it, but the most he can figure is that it's about some study about Five's sleep data. The word inconclusive comes up so many times that he just closes it and sets it down on the small 'unhelpful' pile that the kids make on the corner of the coffee table.

Steve tries really hard to not think about how the whole box is full of weird shit they used to do to him and his siblings as a kid. He especially tries not to think about how everyone is digging through his childhood right now. Instead, he just grabs another file, this one a disturbing autopsy on Six. He skims through it, trying to detach himself from it. Six was nice, he was smart, he could influence other people's emotions, but he rarely used it. Instead, he smuggled any books he could into his room and read as much as he could.

When Steve, or Seven back then, heard the alarms going off and boots stomping on the ground he hoped for the best. Six was smart, smartest of them all if anyone could-

It's too clear in his head, the sounds. A singular gunshot, and screaming that he swears went on forever until three more shots, then just silence.

He can't think about this now, not when he's trying to help El. So instead he reads just enough to determine that it belongs in the same spot on the coffee table as the last file.

They all sit in silence for another few moments, steadily working through the box, until Nancy perks up. She knocks some clutter off the table and slaps her file down.

“I think I got something.” She says, opening it and spreading papers around. Will takes the useless pile off the table and sets it somewhere on the floor. “So this box is full of data and experiments on the kids, right?” She glances nervously at Steve, probably feeling weird that she’s talking about him and his siblings. He just nods at her to keep going.

“But this is one of the thicker files, and the entirety of the first like five pages are about properties and scientific shit about the gate and how it connects to the upside-down, so it’s like out of place. But-” she moves some papers around and lays out different ones, along with some filled with graphs and charts, labeled EPI in bold letters.

“Wait,” Joyce says, cutting Nancy off. “This one, it looks like-remember when we took Will in? Dr. Owens had this same chart on the monitor, with the label and everything.” She turns to Hopper. “He never told me what anything meant, just said they were different vitals.”

“Here.” Nancy hands her a page. “Look, the same charts, the same label as some of the effects testing on the earlier pages. But here’s the thing, it’s all for effects of the ‘Alternate’, which is their word for the Upside Down, on different objects, including organic matter.”

“So they were monitoring Will because he had been there,” Mike says softly, and Steve sees Joyce squeeze Will’s hand under the table.



Steve fidgets with his sleeve, “Yeah but there are those EPI charts for Five through Eleven, and Will, but I never went to the Upside Down.” He says, pointing at the charts.

“You didn’t have to.” Hopper says, sorting through different papers, “They weren’t bringing you to it, they were bringing it to *you* .”

“But why would they do that?” Max asks, “I thought they were two entirely different projects.”

“What if they weren’t?” Dustin says and he looks at Steve, “When we were in the tunnels, and the dogs were coming at us you didn’t use your powers, why not?”

Steve shifts in his seat, “I tried but it was all...weird and I couldn’t move.”

“That was at the same time the El was tearing down the gate because the dogs went to go after her instead. And then you passed out like five minutes after that.”

“When the gate was destroyed,” Lucas adds.

“So what does that mean?” Jonathan asks.

“It means that her powers, Steve’s powers, they’re connected to the Upside Down because of whatever EPI is,” Nancy concludes. Steve’s head is spinning, but in a way, it makes sense, almost.

“So how does this help El?” He asks, trying to refocus, help his sister wake up now, deal with another set of life-shattering news later.

“If both of your powers are connected to the Upside Down, the reason she’s asleep right now, maybe you talk to her, bring her back?” Mike suggests though he doesn’t sound so sure.

“Can you do that cool blindfold thing she does?” Dustin asks him excitedly. “You could find her like, in the void.”

“What?” Steve asks, not knowing what he’s talking about. He doesn’t remember her wearing a blindfold.

“He shouldn’t have to,” Hopper says, “Maybe *she* can find *him* .”

## Notes for the Chapter:

Hey y'all, it's been a while. However, I have been working on this story! Mostly planning, but I also reformatting past chapters just because it looked weird for some reason. Anyway, here's a quick question, I have a couple of rough flashback type chapters that I scrapped just because they either didn't really add anything new or I feel bad adding so many filler type flashback chapters lol. So would y'all be interested in one-shot type things in this same universe? I've seen some writers do that type of thing by making the story a series and adding them

as sequels.

EDIT: I think I've fixed the formatting permanently now, yay!

## 12. Chapter 12

### Summary for the Chapter:

It's still incredibly dark, and there's no edges to anything, no walls or distinguishable floor. Just an expanse of black all around him.

Of all the trauma he got from the lab - (He keeps a list, not on paper but in his head. He has to. It helped at first, then he stopped thinking about it. It made him feel weak the longer the list got.) he didn't know that being blindfolded was something that would bother him. Sure, it seems obvious, now that he has a blindfold on. Sure, it's fair that it slipped his mind because all things considered it's pretty mild, but still, not comfortable.

The blindfold is wrapped tightly but comfortably around his eyes, and it does its job of blocking light out. It's hard to remember that he's sitting on the soft carpeted floor of the Byer's house and not a plastic chair with leads stuck to him. Shit, he must have been young whenever this shit came up, probably much earlier in his testing. Considering that he doesn't need his sight to Stop time, why would it be a repeated experiment? It doesn't really matter though, because either way there's a pit of anxiety settled in his stomach like a rock, and constantly thinking about his loss of sight only makes that rock heavier.

Someone, he assumes Hopper, turns the living room TV to static. Most of them had explained that they had seen El do all these things to help her 'find' people, which Steve was still confused about since he'd never seen her do anything like that, but he guesses that particular part of her power must have come out after he left.

There was no actual guarantee that this whole thing is gonna work,

but if the shit in the files were right, in that Steve and El and everyone from the lab was connected, then it was as good a plan as any. Will and Mike had explained that the ‘mindscape’ or whatever she uses to find people feels one-sided, Mike said that sometimes you could hear her but only faintly. Steve was supposed to be an exception since he was also connected through the gate. If it works, great, if it doesn’t, then he’ll just look stupid. Nothing new.

He takes a deep breath and fumbles around to find El’s hand, hanging limply off the couch. He’s not really sure if he should be meditating or what, but he just keeps his breathing even. Without noticing, he starts to squeeze her hand in time with his breath. After a few minutes, he starts to get light-headed and his eyes begin to unfocus. It’s disorienting and it takes a moment for him to realize that he’s not sitting in the Byer’s living room anymore.

Whatever this is, it’s completely different from when he uses his own power, the feeling of it at least. When he stops time he feels connected to it - he can feel it draped around him like a thick blanket. This though, it surrounds him but he can’t feel it, like he slipped into a pool but can still breathe.

There’s no light coming in from the edges of the blindfold anymore, and he can’t hear the white noise from the TV. It’s still incredibly dark, and there’s no edges to anything, no walls or distinguishable floor. Just an expanse of black all around him. He blinks, trying to keep himself steady.

“Seven.” He hears from his left and he spins to see Eleven. Literally.

It’s not El, like she is now. Instead, it’s the Eleven he knew years ago, tiny. It’s weird, to go from seeing her with her hair slicked back,

being swallowed by a leather jacket to her being bald in the plainclothes they wore in the lab. He blinks. At this moment he wishes that he could turn back time instead of just stopping it. He lets himself imagine, just for a second, that he had scooped her up in his arms, the same way he held her when she was even tinier than this, and took her with him.

He could've forged her papers along with his own, they could've grown up together. Like actual siblings, like Nancy and Mike, or Will and Jonathan. He doesn't let himself think about how he'd be horrible at raising her, at how much he appreciates Hopper. He doesn't think about how he barely got through his own childhood without getting himself caught, and how he'd screw El up more than she already is.

But that didn't happen. The El that's standing in front of him grew up. Though he's pretty confused about why she looks six years younger.

Steve's probably even more confused by the fact that she even recognizes him. She hadn't when they saw each other that first time at the Byer house. So why does she know him now? It could just be freaky mindscape shit or...

He glances down at himself, testing out a theory.

Yep. He's in the same situation as El, or at least he thinks so; since he hasn't worn these ugly scrub-like clothes in years, and there's a big 007 where he usually covers it up with long sleeves or makeup (or in the early years, a big bandaid.) He looks back at Eleven.

“El-” He starts, already choking not even halfway through his sentence. He swallows roughly, a thousand sentences he wants to say right on the tip of his tongue. But it’s not about what he wants to say, it never is. He needs her to wake up, he can’t be selfish about this, so he swallows his thousands of apologies.

*I should have been better. I should have killed that fucker. I should have burnt that lab to the ground.*

“Seven,” El responds breathlessly. “I-”

“You need to wake up.” He finishes for her. “El, you can do this, you can pull yourself out of whatever this is.”

“I can’t.” She says, her breath hitching. She’s starting to softly tear up and it’s fucked up all he can think about is all the times he’d had to remind her that crying wasn’t safe.

“I want to go home.” El cries. The thought hits him then, of just how young she is, not even because of the weird aging down but even the version of her on the Byers’ couch is young. Too young. Christ, she’s Mike’s age.

“I’m sorry.” He blurts out because he can’t hold it back anymore, he’s always been selfish, he’s always been an asshole. “I left you and I shouldn’t have. I-”

And now there are tears welling up in his eyes, but it’s fine because

it's *safe* to cry now. Because neither of them are in the lab and neither of them are ever going back there. So for the first time ever he lets himself cry. His vision goes blurry and he startles at the sudden weight that slams into him. El's arms are flung around his waist, her head buried into his shirt.

She clinging to him so tightly it's hard to get her to loosen her grip enough so he can kneel down and hug her back.

It's a more sustainable position, her arms now around his neck and her head resting on his shoulder. They stay like that for a long while, and it should be awkward, given that they hadn't talked for six years, but it's not. He can't remember so many times when he had turned to ask Eight a question about his homework or said some joke out loud to El before he realized that he'd come out of the lab alone. That he was growing up without his sisters. Instead of awkward, it feels right. There was a whole chunk in his life that he was missing, and a huge part of it was back now.

It's not till his hand goes up to cradle her head and he feels long hair, filled with product and slicked back that he realizes somewhere in the last eternity they'd switched back to their normal selves and not their younger versions.

And she must realize too, because she pulls back, having stopped crying a bit ago. Her brows crease for just a moment in confusion and then her eyes widen slightly in recognition.

"Steve." She says finally. And despite the anxiety shooting through his veins about the fact that she recognizes him now, it feels nice to have his sister call him by the name he chooses to go by, the name that's not just a number. Neither of them were very creative on that



front, she had only kept the first two letter of hers and he only cut out two letters from his.

“Yeah, it’s me.” He says weakly, “Sorry.” He finishes, not sure exactly what he’s apologizing for; the fact that it’s him? That he’d been in Hawkins this whole time while she had to rely on strangers? The million other things he’d fucked up when it came to her?

“Ste-ve” She just repeats, sounding it out. “I like it.”

He smiles.

“Think you can get us home, El?” He asks.

She nods.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

It's been a minute, huh. First things first I wanna say sorry about the weird formatting? I think AO3 must have updated something because the spacing out of paragraphs on all the old chapters got all weird. I've tried to go back and edit it so it looks like before but nine times outta ten it doesn't take for some reason? It's not the worst formatting in the world so I'm just gonna leave it, but it's weird that the formatting just randomly changes after like chapter 10. Other than that, obligatory sorry about the wait. I've been having a lot of fun just writing different one-shots in other fandoms not exactly up to my usual overthinking about quality and that sort of thing. I do plan on publishing those ones sometime in the

future though, so if y'all like taz or dbh look out for that. I also got a big bunch of support on the last chapter about the oneshot book for this fic, so I already did that not long after that chapter was put out. It should show up in the series, it's called "I'm gonna feel alone forever." Which reminds me, I never said that the title of this fic is from February 15th by Hobo Johnson. Just thought I should put that out there since I've never mentioned it. Anyway, I've been going on way too long in this chapter note so I'll shut up now.

Have a great day y'all!

## 13. Chapter 13

### Summary for the Chapter:

There's something about her that's familiar, but he can't put his finger on it.

He wakes up with blood dripping from his nose like a faucet. Some of it sticks to the back of his throat and he coughs, leaning forward. He's sitting, safe, back on the Byers' carpet. He feels someone kneel next to him and tissues being pushed into his hand. He gratefully accepts them and tries to stem the flow of blood.

The blood is thicker than it usually is, so the tissues do the job fairly well, though he'll just have a bunch of dried blood on his face for a while. He looks up and sees Joyce leaning over him, he turns his head and sees El, awake.

Ms. Byer is passing her tissues, but her nosebleed isn't as severe as his. Apparently piggybacking off other people's powers isn't good for your body, who knew?

It's not long until he feels a weight press against his side. He doesn't even have to look to see that it's Dustin, his curly hair pressing against the side of his face. He lazily slings an arm across the kid's shoulder. Hopper mirrors him, sitting next to El and pulling her close.

There's a loud knock on the door as if someone is punching it. They all go still.

“Shit,” Hopper says, standing up and putting El behind him. She tries to shove her way in front, but he pushes her back.

Steve jumps to his feet, a little dizzy but otherwise fine. He quietly runs to his backpack and grabs his bat.

“Okay wait,” Ms. Byers says, “We made a deal with them once, right? There’s gotta be something-”

“About that, mom?” Jonathan says from the corner of the room, looking nervous. Nancy goes pale, her hand gripped tightly around his arm.

As much as Steve is curious as to what the hell that’s about, he’s more concerned about who’s at the door. “Yeah uh, any truce you had, went out the window when they found out I was alive and tracked me here.”

“Bad men,” El says harshly, her voice carrying from across the room.

The knocking comes again, more aggressive this time. Steve quickly positions himself by the side of the doorframe, bat held firmly in his hands.

“Open the door,” Nancy says assuredly, whoever it is continuing to pound on the door.

“What, why?” Mike asks, standing in the hallway where Will, Max, and Lucas are. Nancy and Jonathan are positioned so they just cover them.

“They would have busted through the door already, right? If they were here to fight?”

“I don’t think we want to count on that,” Dustin says, now crouched beside El.

It’s reminiscent of them barricaded in the lab, the adults covering the kids, Hopper and Nancy guns out, aimed at the door. Steve feels his power simmering under his skin, maybe it’s just because he did some sci-fi bonding shit with El, but his power feels more responsive, ready to stop the cog of time from turning.

There’s a brief moment of silence, only filled by the sound of their breath. Then the door slams open, flying backward, a loud squeal coming from the hinges.

There’s no thudding of boots or immediate gunfire. Steve’s at the wrong angle to see who’s coming through the door frame, a quick glance around just shows confusion on everyone’s face, and he’s almost tempted to give up his position just to see who’s there.

The first thing he *does* see is the shine of a silver revolver as the mystery person walks slowly through the door frame. He can see Hopper and Nancy tighten the grip on their guns, but they seem

hesitant to shoot for some reason.

Not wanting to use his power just yet, Steve raises his bat and slams it down as the arm that's holding the gun comes through the frame into his line of sight. His bat catches the gun, knocking it out of the person's hands onto the ground. Nancy is quick to stow hers and grab the stranger's gun off the floor.

His cover now blown, Steve steps out, facing the intruder with his bat raised. He blinks, understanding why everyone else was so confused.

It's a girl. She's probably about his age, a couple of inches shorter than him. Dark skinned with a punk-style haircut. She doesn't look a thing like somebody who was sent from the lab. She looks more like she just got out from a Dead Kennedys concert or a motorcycle race.

"Where's El?" The girl says, her stare boring into him. She's unsettling, but he holds his ground, staring right back. There's something about her that's familiar, but he can't put his finger on it.

"None of your damn business." He responds, "Who the hell are you?"

She moves toward him, probably to push past him, and he steps in her way, lifting the bat higher.

"Stop!" El's voice cuts through the tension and she shoves her way

past Hopper, successfully this time. She uses her power to knock the bat out of his hands. Surprised, Steve turns to face his little sister, keeping an eye on the stranger out of the corner of his eye. "What, kid? You know her?"

She stares at him like he's the stupidest person alive, which was an expression he thought he'd earn later in their reconnection, and slowly points at the stranger, "Eight."

She turns to the girl and gestures at him, "Seven."

It takes a moment to hit him, what she means, and he stops breathing.

He and the girl stare at each other for a minute. There's as much tension as there was just a minute ago, but this time he's not sure what to think. He tries to see the girl as Eight, all grown up. It's a difficult comparison to make since aesthetically they couldn't look more different. But physically, he can see it. Her nose is crooked, bent from being broken. The way she's standing is familiar like she's about to get in a fistfight at any minute. There's blood on her knuckles. He can see it, he can, but she's also so different. He can see her questioning him, too.

"Prove it." They both say at the same time. Steve swallows. He can feel tears building up behind his eyes, and he can see her hands are shaking. She's staring at him, prodding him to go first. A million ways of proving himself go through his head. He could take his jacket off, show her his tattoo, he could Stop and pull her in like he used to, but he feels small. He wants to believe it's her so badly, but it feels so unbelievable. Seeing El somehow wasn't this surprising. He left her when she was little, there was always a chance she was still in

Hawkins. But he knew Eight would either leave the lab and get as far away as possible or die trying.

“You-” He takes a breath, “A year after El was born, you climbed on a table and sucker-punched Brenner right in the face. When I heard what you did, I- I snuck into the cold room-”

“You yelled at me, said that I was stupid and I blew up at you, called you a coward. Then, you took the heat off me for the next month until things calmed down.” She says softly.

“Fuck you.” He responds immediately, his eyes watering. “I thought you were dead-”

“I thought *you* were dead, asshole.” She snuffles, punching him in the shoulder.

There’s a weird ache in his chest. He thought he’d already grieved her, that he’d come to terms with the fact that she could be dead. But now it’s like he’s going through it all again. There’s a fully grown version of Eight standing right in front of him that he doesn’t know and knows all too well at the exact same time. It’s like with El, where he didn’t get to see her grow up.

There’s a small scar on her chin, he wishes he knew where she got it. He wishes he was there when she did. He wishes he could have been there to make fun of her when she chose to start backcombing her hair. There’s a lot of things he wishes he could have done.



“Not that this isn’t fun for all of us who don’t know what’s going on, but what’s going on?” Dustin says, knocking into Steve’s side. He throws an arm around the kid.

“Everybody, this is my sister.” He announces. There are a few confused faces, probably because they don’t exactly look alike, “From the lab.” He adds.

“Kali.” She says, awkwardly waving.

“Your name’s Kali?” He asks, surprised, almost forgetting he didn’t actually know her name.

“Yeah.” She confirms, smirking. “What’s yours?”

“Steve.” He says, and she takes a second and nods.

Mrs. Byers is the second one after Dustin to speak up, “It’s nice to meet you, Kali.” She nudges Hopper with her elbow and he startles, repeating her.

“No offense, Kali,” Jonathan starts, “But why are you here?”

“El called for me,” She says, and explains how she was in her van when she heard El speak to her through the car radio. How she dropped everything to drive down to Hawkins and see what was wrong.

“I remember.” El speaks softly, “I was asleep.”

Kali frowns.

Dustin jumps in, with Mike’s occasional input, to explain about the gate and how El went into some kind of magic coma after, and how they basically just pulled her out.

“How did you know that would work?” She asks, tensing at the part where Steve went under to wake El up.

Steve definitely *doesn’t* pale at having to tell his sister he went back to the lab, “We uh, found some files, a lot of notes on how our powers work, how they’re connected.”

Kali puts the dots together pretty quickly, “You- you went back?”

He glances around and lowers his voice slightly, “I had to. You didn’t see her, Kali.”

She shakes her head, pacing back and forth a few steps at a time. “Did anyone see you?”

He winces, “Define, ‘see?’”

“Steve saved us, used his cool powers to stop time so we could get out.” Dustin helpfully snitches. El and Kali stiffen at the same time. It feels like he’s being ratted out to his parents. If he knew what being ratted out to your parents felt like, cause to be fair, he might be a little off.

“So, just to clarify, they know that you’re alive and in Hawkins,” Kali speaks slowly, looking at him like he’s an idiot. It feels nostalgic.

“In my defense, I was gonna deal with that next, after dealing with the whole ‘El’s-in-a-coma thing.” He says, raising his hands defensively.

“Okay, so what exactly does that mean, that they know he’s alive and here, in Hawkins?” Nancy asks, stepping forward.

“It means,” Kali says, “They’ll be coming for him. Here.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Geez, Steve, why did the author let you have /two/  
sister reunions?

## 14. Chapter 14

### Summary for the Chapter:

Steve thinks maybe this is the worst time to be craving a cigarette.

Steve thinks maybe this is the worst time to be craving a cigarette. He wonders briefly if Kali smokes. Then remembers that he left his pack of smokes in his car, which is currently parked nicely in the parking lot of a place that would very much so like to either capture or kill him.

He takes a deep breath, then breathes out of his mouth, lips shaped as though he was blowing cigarette smoke. He reigns his thoughts back in and centers them on the thing he's supposed to be concentrating on; the fact that he's incredibly screwed.

It's a rollercoaster for sure, his brain right now, considering he's taking a hard left from the euphoria of seeing his sister again. His other sister at least. He's already had his freakout about El, though that was more on hold than actually finished, but for now, he considers that the same thing.

Right, back to what's important: how to get out of this mess.

Well, that one's simple, he's good at escape plans, his whole life has been one big escape plan. He's not good at school, can't do basic math in his head, or know how the hell an essay is supposed to look, but if there's one thing he can wrap his head around it's where the nearest exit is.

The only thing wrong with this in his current situation is that he doesn't want to leave. He likes Hawkins, he's got friends here, though he's not sure if it's weird to call your ex-girlfriend and the guy who cucked you your friends or not, but still. He's got friends, and more importantly, he's got family. El is here, El has a life here, with a dad and everything. She's settled more or less, and he wants to do the same. Lately, he's got a pretty good track record of standing his ground.

Most notably would be when he'd knocked on the Byer's door to apologize to Jonathan, and had gotten a gun pointed at him for it. There was a moment then when his instincts had kicked in, where he saw how easy it would be to run, to get in his car, and drive away. To keep being the Steve Harrington he had worked very hard to be, to be normal.

But being that Steve Harrington wasn't worth it, sure, it was easy, and it was so far from who he was at the lab, but it wasn't who he wanted to be.

Going back into the Byer's house and picking up that baseball bat felt the same as when he hid in one of the lab's trucks and watched the building get smaller in the distance.

So that's really his problem. How does he get out of this mess without leaving?

He's gonna have to stand his ground.

Step 1: Try not to cause more property damage on the Byer's house.

“E-uh, Kali, How’d you get here? You drive?” He asks.

“Yes,” She answers, “I have a van.”

“Can I borrow it?” There’s adrenaline starting to build in his veins now, and he gathers up his things, slinging his backpack over his shoulder.

“What?” She says, “Why?”

“Because as uh, nice as the place is, it’s not the greatest location for a last stand.” He explains, slotting his bat into place on his backpack.

“*Last stand ?*” Hopper echoes.

“Yeah,” Steve confirms, and he just gets a multitude of confused stares back. “Okay, so the uh, thing is- the lab isn’t exactly a let-things-go kinda place. Now that they know I’m alive and in Hawkins, they’re either gonna wanna kill me or take me back. Y’know like a dead or alive kinda thing- like in western movies.”

“You’re not borrowing my van,” Kali says, digging the keys out of her pocket anyway.

“You wanna deal with the guards *here* ?” He asks, gesturing to the Byer’s living room.

“That’s not what I said, I meant that it’s not borrowing it if I’m with you, dumbass.” She says, spinning the keys around her finger.

“Nope.” He responds immediately.

“What do you mean, no?” She asks, a familiar fire igniting in her eyes.

“I mean I’m gonna lead them away. Which means away from here, and away from *you all* .” He leans forward to grab the keys from her hand, but she snatches them back just in time.

“Sure, but you’re going to need help, and I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but I do have these powers which are actually quite useful.”

“Yeah well, so do I, and besides I already owe you one.”

“From what? I *just* got here.”

“Six years ago, you caused a distraction for me, today I’m paying you back; give me your keys.” He reaches for the keys again, but she snatches them back even faster this time.

“That was not a favor, and this is not up for debate.”

Nancy interjects, stepping up to both of them. “Sorry; but your big idea is to leave us *here* and take on the lab by yourself? Where are you even planning on going?”

“They’ll probably have linked my car back to me by now, which means they’ll be crawling all over the Harrington house, so if I get going now, I should be able to catch them before they get here and lead them away.” He explains. It’s a good plan, too, considering he came up with it as he said it. He’s pretty much been treating this as a step-by-step process, but Nancy won’t take that as an answer in a million years.

“And then what? You’re gonna take on however many of them there are all by yourself?” Jonathan adds, his tone just as disbelieving as Nancy’s.

“Yes.” Steve says.

“No.” Kali says at the same time.

“That’s bullshit! You’re gonna need our help,” Dustin says as confidently as ever. The rest of the kids nods in agreement, even Max, which he finds odd considering he just met the kid this week.

“As much as I would love help from a bunch of middle schoolers, the entire reason I’m going is so you *don’t* get shot,” Steve says,



hating that he has to plead with fourteen-year-olds.

“I’m going,” Kali speaks, finality in her voice.

He stares at her for a moment. He can see the kid he once knew in her, can find that same spark in her eyes, a statue that refuses to be moved. When they were younger, it was a known fact that Kali was the one to look out for. They were inseparable, and it wasn’t that Steve was weaker per se, but there was such an undeniable strength in her. Where Steve would bend, she refused to even move. Where Steve would take the hit, she would always try to give as good as she got. It seems as they’ve gotten older she took that quality and dialed it up to eleven.

“That’s not how this works, remember? One of us runs distraction and the other *gets out* .” He says in a low voice. That used to be a common tactic they used, when they had enough warning, they’d take turns in who would do what. When El came along, it became more about whoever could get her out the fastest, who was in the best position to take the blame for her, things like that.

“We’re not kids anymore.” She starts, “There’s no room to sneak back to, no cameras to avoid. Se- Steve, there’s no blame to take.” She lowers her voice to match him, but to be honest there’s no hiding their conversation in the quiet room.

“Look at El, she’s safe now. She’s not a baby anymore.” Kali continues, “And I can’t speak to whatever the hell you’ve been doing here the past six years but I haven’t felt helpless since I left.”

“They just want me.” He begs, his voice cracking, “They don’t even know you’re here, they don’t have to know that you’re here.”

She gives him a sad smile, her jaw set. He knows he’s lost. He can’t ever win against Eight, but he would have never forgiven himself if he didn’t at least try.

“Last stand,” Kali repeats and swings her keys around her finger again. “It’s not gonna be pretty, you two-” She looks pointedly at Nancy and Hopper, “You with us? I’m assuming you have your own gun.” She asks Nancy, raising her eyebrow at Kali’s gun still in Nancy’s hand.

“Yeah,” Nancy says, handing Kali back her pistol. Hopper turns to talk quietly to Ms. Byers about something, but he doesn’t pay attention to what they’re saying. Nancy walks away and quickly returns with the rifle she had earlier.

“You-” Kali points at Jonathan next, “Can you fight? Shoot?”

“Yeah, no, he’s more of a photographer- and I’m not even on board with you going, and you’re trying to recruit the calvary?” Steve interrupts before Jonathan can answer.

“We need all the help we can get.” Kali says, “Right now we’ve got you, me, and those two, hopefully, they’re a good shot.”

“And me!” El speaks up now, offended at not being considered.

“No.” Steve and Kali turn to her at the same time.

“I can help.” She says firmly.

“You just woke up from a coma,” Kali explains.

“And I’m pretty sure there’s a reason I haven’t seen you til now, I’m guessing some kind of safehouse.” Steve glances at the chief, who just nods, “There’s no way. You’re staying here with the other kids.”

Predictably, all of the other kids take this time to talk over each other, pleading their case for going. Hopper and Ms. Byers luckily shut them down before Steve can even start.

“Right then,” Kali says after all the discussions are over. “Get in the van,” She finally tosses him the keys. “You’re driving. I’m shotgun.” She says, hefting her revolver in her hands.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Y'know when you haven't updated a fic in two months, mostly because you moved to a completely different state and then you get a sudden urge to write and put out a new chapter in two days? Cause that's kinda what this is. Seriously though, I can at least promise that this fic will get finished. I can't really promise it'll get finished quickly, given my track record, but we're getting down to the wire folks! We've got a big showdown coming, and it'll be a big test for our heroes and also my ability to write

engaging fight scenes.

Hope y'all are having a great day!

## 15. Chapter 15

### Summary for the Chapter:

She glares, reloading her gun, “Do you know how much this van costs?”

“Absolutely nothing?” Steve scoffs, he may not have seen her for years, but he can’t imagine Kali paying for anything.

“Well - yes. But one of my gang members bought fuzzy dice for the mirror, and that had to be at least a dollar.”

“One of your what?”

Steve’s always loved driving.

It was the first thing that really solidified his freedom when he was younger. Sure, he lived in a big house and not just an empty room, but there was nothing better than being on the road.

When it got time for kids his age to learn how to drive, he was scared. Everyone around him was snatching up their permits and having their parents teach them. He didn’t want to be the only one not behind a wheel, so he walked out of Hawkins town limits and found a junkyard littered with broken down cars.

It took a while and a ton of luck, but he managed to find one that at least could run. So after a lot of trial and error, some more cars from the junkyard, and then finally some strategically stolen ones, Steve gave himself the go-ahead to forge a driver’s license.

The first time he was going 60 down the highway, windows rolled down and the radio turned all the way up...He had never felt so far away from the lab.

Driving Kali's van, on his way to confront his past for hopefully the last time, it's the opposite of that feeling. Instead, his jaw clenches and his shoulders tense up, and it's pretty obvious that this car needs its transmission looked at.

He's about to say that very thing to Kali, but she talks before he can get the chance.

"Steve." She says, her voice sharp. It sounds like a warning.

He scans the roads, looking into each mirror. It's when he glances in the rearview that he sees it. A few cars are forming a pattern, following them. A few white vans trail in the back, and sleek black cars lead them in front.

"Shit."

"Guess they already cleared the Harrington house." Kali remarks, cocking her gun and shifting forward in her seat.

"Looks like we lead them away from the Byer's house at least." He hopes.

She shoots him a look as though she doesn't believe it, but Steve just shakes his head. They should be safe. Even if a few check out the house, they won't find anything. Hopper and Nancy stayed behind to hide El before they were gonna meet them. Ms. Byers and Jonathan should be able to lie well enough to hide their tracks. Should, being the key word.

The real danger is right now, with several cars and vans tailing them. Kali's got her revolver, and Steve has his bat - but neither of them is under the impression that they've got the best odds here. There's a reason it's called the last stand.

"You could still run." Steve tries.

Kali scoffs, rolls down the window, and shoots back at one of the car's windshields in response.

"Oops, looks like they know I'm here." She shrugs.

Steve rolls his eyes and takes a hard left running through a red light. Kali had blown any low profile they'd been trying to keep.

The cars behind them swerve in response, and just like that - it's a car chase.

The gas pedal is to the floor, and Kali's van groans with effort as he shifts gears, but he's got a decent pace going. The only bad thing is that the other cars have almost no trouble catching up.

One of the sleek black cars in the front speed right up next to their van, Steve could count the freckles on the guy's face with how close their car windows are next to each other. He's about to veer in the other direction, but Kali puts a hand on his chest and shoves him back against his seat with one hand and fires her revolver with the other.

Steve watches the man slump over out of the corner of his eye. He takes a hard right, and the cars keep up perfectly. It's not that he's trying to lose them, even, but he'd love some more space. He can't go to the Harrington house. God knows what they've done to it and how many of them are still crawling in it.

"Fuck. Where am I supposed to go?" He asks the air, not really expecting an answer.

"I don't know. I'm not from here!" Kali responds anyway, taking a potshot out the window.

He runs another red light, and a Cadillac honks at him like they can't see the four other cars chasing him. There are a couple warning shots that fly past the van, and Steve wonders if it's sad that this makes him kind of nostalgic.

"Okay. Okay. Home court advantage..." He mutters. A lightbulb goes off. "I think I have an idea, I know where we can go."

He pulls a U-turn. Kali slams against the door - given the lack of a



seatbelt. She glares, reloading her gun, “Do you know how much this van costs?”

“Absolutely nothing?” Steve scoffs, he may not have seen her for years, but he can’t imagine Kali paying for anything.

“Well - yes. But one of my gang members bought fuzzy dice for the mirror, and that had to be at least a dollar.”

“One of your *what?* ” Steve jerks the wheel in surprise.

One of the vans takes the opportunity as they catch up to hit the gas and try to ram them, but Steve instinctively throws a hand out and stops just the vehicle. He lets out a laugh as it actually works, and he holds onto that pocket of time as long as he can as he drives away until it wriggles out of his fingertips.

“Good one.” His sister remarks.

“Thanks,”

“You can barely tell you haven’t practiced in years.”

He blinks and swerves around a car. “You want to do this *now* ?”

She uses her power to stop some civilians from going in the crosswalk, “No better time, we might be dead in a moment.”

Steve swallows, “The last thing I wanted when I got out was to *practice* or - or to have to do anything related to that place again. I wanted to get as far away as possible.”

“Yet you never left Hawkins.”

“I didn’t know where else to go!” A car tries to cut him off, and he takes the risk and slams into the front of it. Luckily, Kali’s van is hardy, and it snaps off the car’s hood with a loud crunching sound.

“I imagined you, all the time. I thought about the life you were living out there on your own. This just- it wasn’t what I expected.”

“What, did you want me to come back?” A bullet hits his side mirror and he flinches.

“Of course not! I helped you-”

“Did you want me to stage some big rescue mission? I had a vocabulary of like thirty words, and I was *scared* all the time!” He yells, “I was a *kid* .”

“So was I!” She screams right back. “But I got out, and I never once stopped thinking about how to tear them all down, about how to

make them *pay* .”

He laughs, but there’s no humor in it, “I may not have left Hawkins, but seems to me like you never left either.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Yeah? Was there ever a time - a single *second* where you felt safe?”

She grits her teeth, “Don’t lie and say you ever felt safe.”

“No.” He chokes out, “But I got close.” He ducks around another car going too slow and slams his hands against the wheel.

“Fuck, Kali, isn’t that what we left for? Isn’t that why we *abandoned* El? So that we could have a life that wasn’t - that wasn’t...”

“This?” She gestures around her - the gun in her hands, cars surrounding them on both sides, and blood trickling from both their noses.

“Yeah.” He sighs. “This.”

Kali takes another shot out the window, and they sit in silence for a moment. Or at least, as much silence as you can have in a car chase

full of screeching tires and screaming pedestrians, which is not much.

“Leaving El was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” She finally says, “But, letting you leave, that - that was the second hardest.”

Steve just nods and looks at her, trying to put everything he wants to say into that look.

*I feel the same.*

*I’m really glad you’re my sister.*

*I don’t want to die.*

The van shakes violently as he hits a dirt road, and the cars chasing him swerve and bump into each other, forced onto the single-lane road by the thick border of trees.

“Where are we going?” Kali asks, and the tension from their previous conversation is gone as they focus on the task ahead.

“We’re connected to the upside down,” Steve explains, “Through the gate that El closed, sure, but I’m betting the connection itself is still there.”

“And?” Kali looks nervously behind them and checks her ammo.

“Nancy told me once about a tree that she fell into- “

“You’re explaining this badly.” Kali interrupts.

Steve returns her glare from earlier. “What I’m trying to say is that it’s not just the lab’s gates that lead to the upside down, and if I’m right about this place having that connection? We - we might just have a shot.”

He parks, if you can call swinging the car around and throwing on the brake parking, in the same spot that he did not even a few days ago.

He passed out the last time he was here, and a kid had to drive his car back. This time around, he’s hoping it’ll go better.

He and Kali exit from the passenger side, using the van as cover. Some shots ring out in the air and lodge themselves into the driver’s side door.

“Hope you’ve got insurance,” Steve remarks.

“I do not,” Kali replies dryly.

He points out the entrance to the tunnels, though he's not sure they even need to go in them to access their connection to the gate. The first time, he'd tried to use his powers at the wrong time and it backfired, but he can't think of a place that's more likely to have a link to the upside down; he just has to figure out how to use it.

"How many bullets do you have left?" He asks Kali, trying to get any kind of plan to come to his brain. This is as far as he'd gotten when he was driving.

"Not enough."

"Perfect."

Thundering footsteps start to approach the van, too light to be more than one person but they move quickly, getting closer and closer. Steve's brain is screaming *danger danger danger dang-*

He hears the gunshot before he registers anything else and Stops instinctively. He doesn't have to time to think about it as he Stops just the area around Kali, hoping to catch the bullet and giving her time to respond.

It's too late when he realizes that the bullet was never headed for Kali.

If he had just Stopped time entirely, then it wouldn't be a problem, but he'd focused it on a certain area, the wrong one, evidently. It was

a stupid move. What else did Steve have in him but stupid moves?

He expects the pain to come, for it to start at one spot and then blossom out through his body. He's prepared for it. He hears the shot and knows he's going to die. But the moment where he should have been shot passes, and Steve looks to see the bullet just staring at him.

It's not Stopped; he knows that. It's more like it's just *hanging* in the air. He looks over to Kali to see if maybe she'd used her powers on him as a final act of mercy, for him to see something different while he actually lays there, dying.

But she's just as shocked as he is. And it's not until El steps out from the van and cracks the man's neck that they realize what's going on.

His body drops, and before he knows it Kali is dragging El by the arm until she's closer to them. Steve can hear loud footsteps of the men behind the van repositioning. The one they sent but have been a test, seeing how close they could get.

"What are you doing here?" Kali asks her.

El just blinks up at them, "Thank you." She says sternly.

"What?" Steve says.

“You say ‘Thank you’ to me.” She nods over to the dead man on the ground, “I saved you.”

Steve takes a deep breath and wonders how exactly he got to this point in his life. “Eleven, thank you. Now, what the hell are you doing here?”

“You are supposed to be hiding out, where is your- where is the man, the cop?” Kali adds.

“Hopper.” Steve supplies.

“Hopper.” Kali finishes.

“I can *help* .” El says, “No. More. Hiding.”

More gunshots ring through the air. A few hit the spot in the van they’re hiding behind while others sail past, blowing pieces of tree bark off of the trees behind them.

The shots are much closer now and starting to close in from the sides. Their cover won’t hold for long.

He looks at Kali, “She’s right, we can’t - no more hiding.”



“Fuck.” She stares at the wreckage of her van and rechecks her bullets, “Okay, alright. No more hiding.”

Steve nods, “I’m gonna Stop, just so I can check how many there are and how clo-”

Just then, a familiar voice echoes through the area, just as tall and imposing as the trees.

“I believe I gave the order to take them alive.”

He hears Martin Brenner’s voice for the first time in years, and Steve’s blood runs cold.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Wow, what's this? A Christmas update??? Yep, I did not forget about this fic, promise. Only a couple more chapters to go, and that last one is an epilogue, so it's all very exciting, folks. I kinda realized writing this chapter that I've made Kali OOC in this fic, but personally, I'm not really mad at it since she didn't have much of a personality in the show anyway. But if you're a Kali fan, sorry, I changed her backstory a lot and that sorta made her character change. Merry Christmas to y'all who celebrate it, and happy Saturday to those who don't :)